

JULY'25
LAKE & SUMTER

style



IT'S NOT BULL

Umatilla coach Eric Samuels proves pride, purpose and perseverance still define the Bulldog way.

PG. 78

CHEERS TO TEN

Turners celebrates a decade of bold flavors and intimate dining that Leesburg continues to crave.

PG. 82

FOREVER FRANK

Villager's voice, humor and heart prove that great entertainers never really retire.

PG. 58



RESCUE me

Behind shelter walls in Lake and Sumter, overlooked animals wait for love and fur-ever homes.

PG. 28



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JULY'25

V.21 X N.09

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JULY'25

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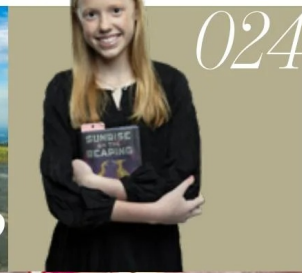
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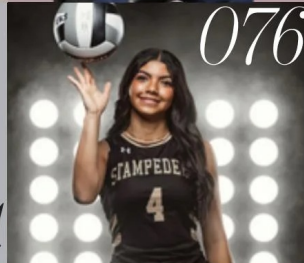
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Design: Michael Gaulin
On the Cover: Adopt a Pet



Village Edition
Design: Shawnee Coppola
Photo: Nicole Hamel
On the Cover: UF Health
Orthopaedics & Spine

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FROM THE PUBLISHER

Caring for our Furry Friends

The important conversations we need to have now!

As a devoted dog lover and proud momma to amazing pups Murphy and Mando, dogs hold a special place in my life.

Their unconditional love, cheerful wagging tails and playful ways remind me daily of the joy they bring into our homes.

One of my lifelong dreams is to create a sanctuary for dogs in need, a place where they can find safety, love and a chance to thrive. While that dream awaits, there's a crucial conversation we must have about the choices we make for the animals we care for.

This month, we're addressing a difficult but vital topic. What happens when families face the painful decision to surrender their pets?

For many, this decision is accompanied by guilt, heartbreak and uncertainty. That's understandable, because surrendering a pet should always be the final option, explored only after every possible alternative has been exhausted.

Caring for an animal is a privilege and this responsibility demands our unwavering effort to provide for them.

This issue offers insights into the emotional toll this process has on pets themselves, shedding light on the stages of grief they endure.



Through a series of interviews with compassionate shelter staff, we've uncovered the daily reality of those who work tirelessly to ease this transition for animals.

When surrendering a pet becomes inevitable, this decision must be made responsibly and with the pet's well-being in mind. Partnering with reputable shelters that prioritize health, safety and a better chance at adoption is an essential act of responsibility and love. Most importantly, it's critical to understand this distinction—surrender is not abandonment. Leaving an animal to fend for itself is harmful and inhumane, while surrendering ensures access to care and a brighter future.

Finally, I ask you to consider offering your heart and home to a pet in need. Many shelters are at full capacity and countless animals need us now more than ever. Whether adopting, volunteering or spreading awareness, every action is one step closer to a positive outcome.

For those already lucky enough to have a furry companion, give them an extra hug, tummy rub or treat tonight. Our furry friends remind us what it means to love selflessly and wholeheartedly.

Until next month,

Kendra

Kendra

Have a story to tell?

We're always looking for stories about people who live and work in our area. Send suggestions to editorial@akersmediagroup.com.

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FIRST

PEOPLE
COMMENTARY
NEWS

PERSON OF INTEREST

Some coast into retirement but Eric Nihill hit the accelerator and hasn't taken his foot off since.

22





TOO HOT TO TROT?: Before heading out with your pup this summer, do the five-second pavement test because summer heat can turn sidewalks into sizzling surfaces—if it's too hot for your hand, it's too hot for their paws. Walk your dogs early in the morning or after sunset, bring water, watch for signs of overheating and never leave them in a hot car—even for a minute.

LEESBURG LEGACY: Leesburg celebrates more than summer fun on Lake Harris in July. The city was officially incorporated on July 12, 1875, by a vote of 23 to 2, with just 150 residents. Its first town election followed on July 17. The city hosted its first **Watermelon Festival** at the end of June in 1930 and record-high melon prices marked the season's close on July 2, 1943.

For more history and information about Leesburg, visit the Leesburg Heritage Museum, Tues-Sat 10am-2pm. 111 S. 6TH ST. 352.315.1800 / LEESBURGMUSEUM.ORG.



PAWS FOR A CAUSE: For 20 years Sally Guggino has volunteered with **Paws for Therapy**, bringing comfort to hospitals nursing homes and events with her rescue dog Merlin, her third therapy partner. Together they've spent seven years visiting places like Madison at Clermont, where residents light up when they arrive. Sally visits five locations a week including schools and libraries, helping children and adults alike feel seen and loved. Fellow volunteer Jackie Kelly nominated her as a CommUNITY Champion, and while the honor surprised Sally she says the real reward is the gratitude she receives. As for Merlin, hugs and treats are enough to make him happy.



WINGS IN THE WILD: Join Lake County staff for the **Quarterly Bird & Butterfly Survey** at Ellis Acres Reserve in Paisley on Saturday, July 19 at 7:30am. Volunteers will help identify native birds and butterflies and provide valuable data that supports the long-term conservation of this natural area. Bring binoculars and a keen eye for wildlife.

- For more information, contact Gallus Quigley at 352.253.4950.
- Location: 25302 County Road 42, Paisley
- Next survey: November 1, 2025.

HALFWAY HYPE: Online sources note that **July 2** falls right at the heart of the calendar year. In a typical, non-leap year, it stands as the precise midpoint—182 days in, with 182 still to go. On leap years, the balance shifts slightly, with the true halfway moment landing at the very start of the day.





FIELD TESTED, OFFICER APPROVED: Corporal Lidia Maya has been named the Lady Lake Police Department's 2024 Officer of the Year. She was honored with the "Service Above Self Award" at the Leesburg Rotary Club's 44th Annual Law Enforcement Program. Known for her professionalism and leadership, Corporal Maya has guided more than a dozen recruits as a field training officer. Her calm, collaborative style and strong integrity have earned widespread respect. Chief Steve Hunt praised her dedication, calling her a role model in service and mentorship.



DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE: Downtown Tavares transforms for a whimsical escape with **Hatter's Garden of Curious Curiosities**, a limited-time pop-up experience at Crafted Concoctions. Step inside for Wonderland-inspired mischief where teacups brim with curiously crafted cocktails and elixirs, both spirited and zero-proof. The 'Mad Hour' runs Tuesday through Friday from 4 to 6pm, but full-service dining and magical sips begin at noon. Located at 115 E. Main Street, this enchanted garden disappears with August's end. Guests must be 21 or older to enjoy the mad potions.

BERRYLICIOUS: Try a cool summer parfait using beautiful, bountiful Florida berries and low-fat creamy goodness. From the **Style** recipe files:

SUMMER BERRY PARFAIT:

- Strawberries
- Blueberries
- Raspberries
- Low-fat vanilla yogurt



DIRECTIONS: (Best served in mason jars to keep fresh)

- Slice strawberries
- Layer fruits, then yogurt
- Garnish with fruit and mint



KIDVENTURE TIME: Looking for fun activities for kids during summer—and all year long? Check out Fun4LakeKids.com for a complete guide to camps, classes, events and more in Lake and Sumter counties. It's your go-to resource for keeping kids entertained and engaged!



A NOVEL EFFORT: Lake County Schools students read an impressive 367,790 books during the **2024-'25 Superintendent's Reading Challenge**. The district-wide initiative encouraged students to meet age-appropriate reading goals, with support from parents when needed. Goals range from 25 fiction, nonfiction and free choice books for elementary to eight for high school students. Students who met their goals were honored by their schools and top-participating schools received plaques. The following schools were recognized at a school board meeting in May: Beverly Shores, Cypress Ridge, Eustis, Eustis Heights, Grassy Lake, Groveland, Lost Lake, Pine Ridge, Sawgrass Bay, Seminole Springs, Sorrento and Tavares elementary schools; Aurelia M. Cole and Lake Pointe K-8 academies; Carver and Mount Dora middle schools and Mount Dora High School. 📖

**At the Tesla Club:**

Our focus is primarily on the mechanical and technical aspects of the car. I see my role as that of a facilitator. Each member of our board has different skill sets that they bring to the table.

My Career: I am a Navy veteran and I worked for The Bell System/AT&T for 30 years. I retired in 1999. I did a few small jobs before working for Amtrak in the communications department. I retired from there in 2018. I am currently joyfully unemployed, aka, retired.

Additional

Involvement: I am Assistant District Director for USA Dance for Florida and parts of Georgia. Our goal is to support ballroom dancing.

Hobbies: Besides dancing, I enjoy dabbling in communications and electrical work. I have my amateur radio license along with my Federal Communications Commission (FCC) certification license. I do most of my own home repairs. I also enjoy traveling internationally, especially throughout Western and Central Europe and I have a soft spot for Ireland. I enjoy a bit of craic (fun)!

What Matters Most:

To never stop learning, to stay active and to enjoy

life. Once you give up on any of those, it is hard to climb back up the hill. There is no reset/undo button in life.

Fun fact:

When I was young, I owned a Ford Lotus. There were only two Lotuses on Long Island. The owner of the other one decided to rob a bank at night. He was definitely a few fries short of a Happy Meal.

Most Memorable Life

Moments: My best memories are those of raising my son and the time spent with family.

Mantra I Live By: Live your life for the future. Spend your time looking out the windshield at where you can go, not staring in the rearview mirror at where you have been. The more time you focus on the mirror of your past, the more likely you are to wreck your future.

Life Lesson: Always work on trying to place yourself in a positive energy environment. Life will always find ways to distract you from that. ☺

PEOPLE

Eric Nihill

Tesla Club President holds multiple leadership roles despite being 'happily unemployed.'

STORY: CINDY PETERSON × PHOTO: NICOLE HAMEL

VITAL
STATS

- 73 years old
- Originally from Glenhead, NY
- Lives in the Village of Hillsborough
- U.S. Navy, 1971-1975, Pensacola - Machinist's Mate 3rd Class (PO3)
- President of The Villages Tesla Club for 3 years
- Calls his Tesla 'Car 54'



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PEOPLE

SIDNEY REYNOLDS

Straight A student hopes to channel passion for science into a career as a marine biologist.

STORY: CYNTHIA MCFARLAND × PHOTO: NICOLE HAMEL

VITAL STATS

- Age 13
- 8th grader at South Sumter Middle School
- April 2025 Career and Technical Education Student of the Month

- Member of South Sumter Middle Robotics Team for three years
- Other school activities: Cheerleading
- Born in Leesburg, lives in Lake Panasoffkee

One of my greatest accomplishments:

Making “A” Honor Roll every year. I’ve made straight A’s since kindergarten.

Favorite subjects in school: Science and Math. I can’t pick between them!

Science/Tech achievements: I made it to Regionals in Science Fair in both the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years. My project this year was “Machine Learning and Predicting Water Quality.” I was also awarded 2nd place in the 2024 Sumter Invention Convention for my App invention—“Don’t Press X”—created to help students remember to charge and update their school computers regularly.

Something people might not know

about me: I like building things—especially Legos and for robotics.

I am also interested in: Reading fiction, particularly fantasy. I really liked The Hunger Games series.

My closest friends describe me as:

Smart. Kind. Funny. A good leader.

Outside of school: I hang out with my family a lot. My dad (Marcus) works for the federal government and my mom (Kali) is the assistant principal at Lake Panasoffkee Elementary.



I’m big sister to Makenna, 12, Liam, 5, and Ellie, 3.

A lot of my inspiration comes

from: My family. They support me and make sure I always do my best and don’t slack off.

Future plans:

I want to be a marine biologist. After high school at South Sumter High, I plan to attend the University of Florida and get my bachelor’s degree in Marine Sciences. Then I hope to earn an advanced degree in Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences so I can use that training and knowledge to pursue a career as a marine biologist. Mainly, I want to study sharks. Being on Discovery Channel’s “Shark Week” is one of my future goals.

Pets: I have two dogs, Rex, an Old English Bulldog, and Chewie, a Goldendoodle-Aussie cross.

One change I’d like to make in the world:

Help clean up the environment.

What matters most to me: Education and my family.

Fun fact: I like to sing. Country music and pop are my favorites. I sang in the middle school choir for two years.

Favorite snack: Goldfish crackers. 🐟

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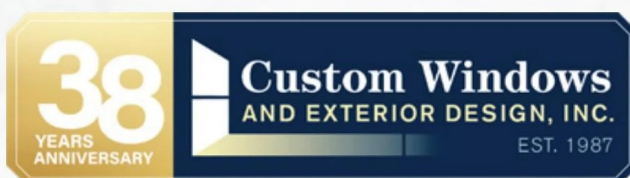


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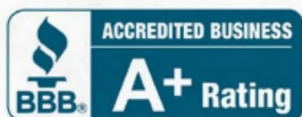
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RBOI is named for Robert "Rusty" Boissoneault, who died at 23 from Hodgkin's disease. Dr. Norman Anderson then vowed to dedicate his life's work to the best cancer care possible in memory of his childhood friend.

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large windows, an atrium with natural features, and an intimate family consultation room with soundproof walls. Soft music plays instead of a pager. Whenever you call us during business hours, a live person will answer.

What happens in a consultation?

Your radiation oncologist will:

- Review your past medical history.
- Discuss with you your diagnosis, tests, and pathology report.
- Outline your treatment options.
- Give you whatever time you need to ask questions.
- Refer you to more appropriate care if radiation is not indicated.

During treatment, your radiation oncologist will meet with you at least once a week, and will continue to see you after treatment, less frequently, for follow-up examinations and to address any questions or concerns.

What happens during treatment?

Once you are in your gown, a licensed, certified therapist will take you to a linear accelerator, which will deliver high-energy X-rays and electrons to your tumor(s). You will be placed in the same position you were in during the simulation. As the accelerator rotates around you, you will hear it running but will not sense or feel anything. Your therapist will monitor your treatment carefully through cameras and computer systems outside the room.

Afterwards, the therapist will re-enter and assist you out of the room. Your actual treatment will last about five minutes per session, and your time in the treatment room will typically last no longer than about ten minutes.

You will also meet regularly with a licensed clinical social worker, who can:

- Help you understand what to expect moving forward.
- Provide resources (including educational materials) to help you manage information from your medical team and communicate your needs.
- Match you with another cancer survivor who shares a similar diagnosis and experience.
- Provide counseling for you and your loved ones.
- Link you to practical assistance programs to help with financial concerns, transportation, disability, and more.

You can view a complete video walk-through at RBOI.com/home/patient-services/before-treatment/your-first-visit/

by the numbers

1

"The patient comes first."
– Dr. Norman Anderson

1990

RBOI first opens its doors to patients from all over north central Florida on April 30.

10%

Free-standing radiation oncology centers in the US currently accredited by the American College of Radiology (ACR), the "gold standard" in medical imaging.

1998

RBOI is accredited by the ACR and has maintained accreditation ever since.

How does one prepare for radiation treatment?

After your consultation, a simulation will give your medical team the information necessary to tailor treatment to your exact needs. A mold will be made customized to your body. A CT scan will show your medical team where to focus treatment. Your radiation oncologist will meet with our full-time board-certified dosimetrists and medical physicists to design your treatment, which they will monitor every week.

Check to see if a spot looks different from all the other spots on your skin. If you see something that causes you concern, tell your doctor.



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RBOI.com



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REHOMING HOPE

For every paw
without a place,
there's a chance
for love, rescue and
a new beginning.



STORY: CYNTHIA MCFARLAND

PHOTOS: NICOLE HAMEL

Every year, 6.3 million animals enter U.S. shelters. Thanks to adoptions, 4.1 million of those creatures find homes.

That's the bright side.

Tragically, about 530,000 cats and 390,000 dogs aren't adopted and end up euthanized.

That's 920,000 individual lives of cats and dogs who can feel love, fear and pain.

They've done nothing to deserve a death sentence. These animals deserve forever homes. They are in the shelter system through no fault of their own.

BUSTING ADOPTION MYTHS

One of the biggest myths about shelter animals is that they have behavioral issues, are unhealthy or old.

"Most of the pets that end up in shelters have already had a family at one time, so they have basic knowledge about being in

a home. Many are housebroken and good with kids," says Angie Klein, executive director for the Humane Society of Lake County.

Full capacity of the shelter, which opened in 1976, is 16 dogs and about 30 cats. The most animals they've adopted out in one year is 529.

Another common myth is that shelter pets are "mutts," so you need to buy from a breeder or pet shop if you want a purebred.

"You would be surprised at the number of purebreds who come through shelters. Florida also has a lot of purebred resources," Angie says.

"At pet stores, you're getting a 'product,' not a puppy that's been cared for and knows how to interact with people. Pet stores have a lot of puppy-mill puppies that grew up in horrific conditions and often have genetic conditions. You may not know this right away, but these things can show up as they mature," she notes.

When you come to a shelter to adopt, you're getting an animal that is fully vaccinated (if adult), microchipped, has already been checked for disease and has a clean bill of health.

"We're involved with the prison program where dogs go through a 12-week program that includes house training and basic

ADOPT A **PET** 🐾





MONICA
Hoffmeyer
Animal
Rescue



training to make them more adoptable,” says Angie.

Adoption saves at least two lives, sometimes more.

“When you adopt a shelter animal, you’re saving that animal and the next animal that can come in to fill that spot,” Angie says.

Since no-kill shelters like the Humane Society of Lake County also take pets from overstocked shelters, you open the door for another animal to be rescued from the cycle when you adopt.

Reputable shelters work hard to match animals and adopters.

“If you currently have a dog or cat, tell the shelter employee. We know our animals and ‘cat test’ all our dogs. We know which dogs are ‘cat friendly’ and friendly to other dogs,” Angie says.

If a family already has a dog, that pet should come to the shelter for a meet-and-greet with the perspective new dog to make sure they’re compatible.

“It’s important to realize this is a lifelong commitment. You’re getting this pet to enhance each other’s lives,” Angie says.

Shelters also work with adopters to get training when needed. They also offer low-cost vaccination clinics.

Humane Society of Lake County
16435 McKinley Rd., Umatilla, FL 32784
352.589.7400 | www.humanelake.com

EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

“Pets come into our care from a variety of previous circumstances, so the experience of each animal will be unique to that animal,” says Whitney Boylston, director of the office of animal services for Lake County.

The initial transition can be stressful for pets that lose comfort and stability of their home due to their guardian dying.

The scenario is much different for animals who come off the street or from negative situations. For them, the shelter may be the safest, most stable and loving environment they’ve ever known.

At the Lake County Animal Shelter, the goal is to help every animal adjust to changed circumstances and



“NO KILL” SHELTERS

These are operations that only use euthanasia in cases where the animal is vicious and poses a threat, or when the animal suffers from a condition that can't be relieved by medical treatment.

prepare each one for adoption to a forever home.

“We embrace a ‘fear free philosophy’ and all employees are trained with this. We treat the pets as individuals, read their body language and recognize their emotional and mental wellbeing as a priority,” Whitney says.

For “shut down” dogs that are frightened, quiet time in an office space may help them relax. Enrichment time and play time with compatible buddies is built into the routine for all animals to establish stability.

“The shelter is the best place for some animals in some situations, but for many other animals in other situations, the shelter may not be the best situation. If you find an animal in your neighborhood and don’t know the owner, you can register online for the Finder Foster program,” Whitney advises. “It’s an easy way to help the pet not experience the stress of the shelter and increase the odds of them getting back with their family.”

Many people don’t realize that 42 percent of “stray” animals are found within 400 feet of their front

door. The majority are within a mile of their home.

If you find a dog or cat, you can bring the animal to the Lake County Animal Shelter drive-through to be scanned for a microchip. The shelter will provide any needed supplies (crate, food, vaccinations, flea treatment) before you take the animal home to foster. If the owner isn’t located, you can transition from foster to adopter.

“Finder Foster has really taken off over the last couple years to encourage the community to become a partner in animal welfare,” Whitney notes.

Lake County Animal Shelter has had 14,621 adoptions since its grand opening in January 2021.

Annually, they admit 5,500 to 6,500 animals. At press time, there were 156 dogs and 41 cats on site. A significant number of kittens were also in foster homes.

Most adoptions through the shelter include sterilization, vaccinations, microchipping and personalized ID tags. Promotions to encourage adoptions run regularly—for example, July features a Summer Lovin’ program with “Grease”-themed specials all month. Another promotion is planned for August,

NELLIE
Lake County
Animal
Shelter



GET 
READY!

Before you adopt, prepare your home for the new pet. Have supplies on hand, including crate, carrier, bed, litter box, bowls, toys and food. Ask what the animal is eating and buy the same food to make the adjustment easier.



and cats are always adopt one at \$10, get one free.

The fee to adopt a dog starts at only \$20 and older dogs—who Whitney says desperately need loving, ‘all-about-them’ homes to see them through—are often sponsored, meaning compassionate end-of-life care is covered if needed.

The shelter also offers a “Working Cats” program for unsocialized cats that excel as rodent control “employees” in barn and warehouse environments.

If you want to make a difference, but can’t adopt at this time, donations of money and/or time are gratefully welcomed.

Whitney says volunteers are always needed to spend time loving on animals in the shelter.

“This one-on-one time is impactful. We are always looking for dedicated animal lovers to join our team,” she says. “The single greatest gift the community can give shelter pets is their time. There’s no substitute for loving human interaction for the pets in our care.”

Lake County Animal Shelter
12280 County Rd 448, Tavares, FL 32778
352.343.9688 | www.lakecountyfl.gov/animal-shelter

FOSTERING SAVES LIVES

“We can’t erase an animal’s past, but we can underwrite their future,” notes Tarah Woelk, rescue coordinator at Hoffmeyer Animal Rescue, which has been saving animals since 2019.

Because the facility’s main adoption center in Tavares houses only cats, the rescue relies on a team of fosters to house dogs and additional cats. They took in 272 cats and dogs in April and 113 were adopted.

All cats are fully vetted before adoption, so you can adopt confidently knowing that your new pet is healthy, spayed/neutered, dewormed, flea treated, microchipped and fully vaccinated (adults) or at least received their first series of shots (kittens).

In April, the rescue had 319 animals in foster care — temporary homes that take in animals under eight weeks old, those needing care after

surgery or rescue, or when the main facility is full.

“We can’t accept as many animals without fosters. These temporary homes are lifesaving,” says Tarah, who notes that most fosters are volunteers.

“Many people want to help but can’t take on another permanent pet. Our fosters normally provide food and litter as their donation. Hoffmeyer takes care of any veterinary and medical expenses,” she explains.

The shortest foster time is one week; the longest is 16 weeks. Many fosters take animals for somewhere between the minimum and maximum.

Senior and hospice fosters are on an as-needed basis.

“Giving quality time at the end of life to a senior or ailing animal is so important and Hoffmeyer takes care of the medical and final expense costs,” says Tarah, noting that most adopters want a kitten or young cat with a long life ahead.

Fostering gives caretakers an opportunity to get to know a cat’s personality and behavior, which

ADOPT A **PET** 🐾

makes it easier for the rescue to place them.

"Fostering is very flexible, and foster families change the animals' lives in such important ways. All the good work put into making them friendly, healthy and able to be part of a family makes the foster the most important steppingstone between rescue and adoption," says Tarah.

Want to change lives by fostering? Complete the foster application on Hoffmeyer's website and they'll reach out to you.

Hoffmeyer Animal Rescue

296 Silverado Street, Tavares, FL 32778
342.455.7421 | www.hoffmeyeranimalrescue.com

GIVING UP A PET

Nationwide, about 30 percent of animals in shelters are there because of owner surrender.

People give up their pets for a variety of reasons. Financial

challenges, moving and owner health issues top the list.

"At our shelter the biggest reasons we see are an owner developing health problems, the owner dies or has to move to assisted living," says Cheryl Courtright, shelter director of Humane Society of Sumter County in Lake Panasoffkee.

The shelter, which opened in 1982, has dogs and cats at their facility and in foster care. An average of 45 animals are adopted each month.

Surrender should be a last resort.

"If an owner is planning to surrender their pet because of the economy, we try to help them keep the dog. Our Kibbles Program provides food if the owner meets the low-income criteria," Cheryl says. "We also have a spay/neuter program to help low-income owners keep a pet rather than surrender it. We try to help with every alternative we can for the owner to keep their

pet. We are more than a shelter; we work with our community with these programs."

When an owner has exhausted all options and feels they have no other choice, surrendering their pet to a reputable no-kill shelter can be a responsible, although sad, decision. Surrendering is always a better option than just abandoning the pet, which unfortunately, happens often.

"An abandoned pet has the risk of being hit by a car, starving or becoming prey. They're domestic animals and can't survive on their own. It's better to surrender the animal to a shelter where they will be fed, well taken care of and have a chance at a forever home," Cheryl says.

Humane Society of Sumter County

994 County Road 529a, Lake Panasoffkee, FL 33538
352.793.9117 | www.hsspc.org



AREA ANIMAL **SHELTERS** & *RESCUES*



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1400 S. Bay St., Eustis, FL 32726
407.221.1855
www.aforeverhomeanimalrescue.org

CAT PROTECTION SOCIETY

2700 Getford Rd., Eustis, FL 32726
352.589.6228
www.thecatprotectionsociety.org

HOFFMEYER ANIMAL RESCUE

296 Silverado St., Tavares, FL 32778
352.455.7421
www.hoffmeyeranimalrescue.com

HUMANE SOCIETY OF LAKE COUNTY

16435 McKinley Rd., Umatilla, FL 32784
352.589.7400
www.humanelake.com

HUMANE SOCIETY OF SUMTER COUNTY

994 CR 529A, Lake Panasoffkee, FL 33538
352.793.9117
www.hsspc.org

HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE NATURE COAST

7200 Mobley Rd., Brooksville, FL 34601
352.796.2711
www.humanerescue.org

LAKE COUNTY ANIMAL SHELTER

12280 CR 448, Tavares, FL 32778
352.343.9688
www.lakecountyfl.gov/animal-shelter

MARION COUNTY ANIMAL SERVICES

5701 SE 66th St., Ocala, FL 34480
352.671.8700
www.animalservices.marionfl.org

SUMTER COUNTY ANIMAL SERVICES

819 CR 529, Lake Panasoffkee, FL 33538
352.689.4400
www.sumtercountyfl.gov/1175/Animal-Services

THE ANIMAL LEAGUE

4648 Baptist Island Rd., Groveland, FL 34736
www.theanimalleague.org



AVAILABLE PETS

..... **LAKE**
COUNTY

..... **SUMTER**
COUNTY



LACEY

BREED: *American Staffordshire Terrier Mix*

GENDER: *Female*

AGE: *Senior*

COLOR: *White*

SHELTER: *Lake County Animal Shelter*

FACTS

Spayed / Neutered

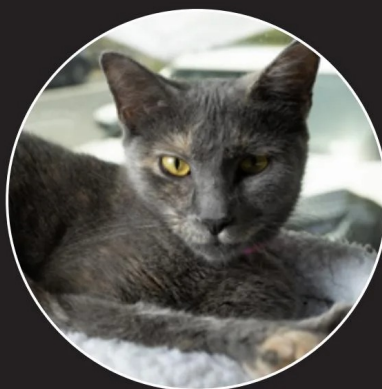
Not good with cats

Not good with children

A little shy

Loving

Meet Lacey! This stylish pup is shy at first but quickly becomes loving once she warms up. She loves hiding her favorite toys in the yard and needs a patient adopter to help her build trust. Lacey thrives as the only pet in a cat-free, kid-free home. Thanks to generous donors, she'll also receive a FREE adoption kit!



CLARA

BREED: *Dilute Calico*

GENDER: *Female*

AGE: *Young*

COLOR: *Black and brown*

SHELTER: *Hoffmeyer Animal Rescue*

FACTS

Spayed / Neutered

Vaccinations up to date

House Trained

Good with cats

Good with children

Affectionate

Friendly

Gentle

Clara came to the shelter pregnant and has been a wonderful mom to her kittens. Now, this sweet, social cuddlebug is ready for a home of her own. She's fully vetted, spayed, microchipped, vaccinated, and on monthly flea prevention—ready to join your family!



SIMBA

BREED: *Redbone Coonhound Mix*

GENDER: *Male*

AGE: *Adult*

COLOR: *Red, Chestnut, Orange*

SHELTER: *Humane Society of Sumter County*

FACTS

Spayed / Neutered

Vaccinations up to date

Good with dogs

Loves playtime

Simba may not rule the Pride Lands, but he'll surely rule your heart! This big, goofy guy is a bit shy at first, but with patience, he blossoms into a loyal, affectionate lovebug. He's great with other dogs and loves to play, showing off his fun, silly side.





TIGER

BREED: *Domestic Shorthair*

GENDER: *Male*

AGE: *Adult*

COLOR: *Tan or Fawn Tabby*

SHELTER: *Humane Society of Lake County*

FACTS

Spayed / Neutered

Good with kids

Good with cats

Not good with dogs

Vaccinations up to date

Affectionate

Curious

Playful but gentle

Tiger is a gentle, 2-year-old male cat with a sweet, mellow nature. Though shy at first, he's really come out of his shell and now enjoys attention and affection. He gets along well with other cats and would thrive in a calm, quiet home. All Tiger wants is a cozy bed and a loving person to share it with.



CHICO

BREED: *American Staffordshire Pitbull Mix*

GENDER: *Male*

AGE: *11 years*

COLOR: *White and Blue*

SHELTER: *Lake County Animal Shelter*

FACTS

Good with children

Does well in the car

Does well in bath

Not good with dogs

Loves belly rubs and cuddles

Prefers soft toys that squeak

Sweet and gentle

Meet Chico! This sweet, snuggly pup is full of love and charm. He's great with kids, knows how to sit for treats, and adores attention—especially belly rubs! Chico would thrive in a cat-free home where he can soak up all the love.



CUPCAKE

BREED: *Hemingway Polydactyl & Domestic Long Hair Mix*

GENDER: *Male*

AGE: *Adult*

COLOR: *White*

SHELTER: *Humane Society of Lake County*

FACTS

Extra-Toes Cat

Vaccinations up to date

Spayed / Neutered

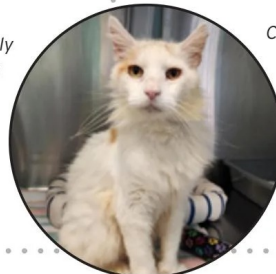
Good with cats

Good with dogs

Good with children

Affectionate

Cupcake is a handsome 7-year-old long-haired polydactyl cat—meaning he has extra toes! This sweet, affectionate boy loves to purr and soak up attention. He lived with other cats and is said to do well with dogs and kids.



**6.3 million pets enter U.S. shelters each year
(about 3.1 million dogs and 3.2 million cats).**



PEARLA

BREED: *Domestic Shorthair*
GENDER: *Female*
AGE: *Young*
COLOR: *Tortoiseshell*
SHELTER: *Humane Society of Lake County*

FACTS

Good with children
Good with cats
Vaccinations up to date
Spayed / Neutered
Affectionate
Gentle
Snuggly

Pearla is a 2.5-year-old kitty with beautiful markings and a sweet, shy nature. Once she warms up, she loves attention and enjoys socializing with other cats. Come meet this darling girl and see if she's the perfect snuggle buddy for your home.



ROBIN

BREED: *Chihuahua, Short Coat*
GENDER: *Male*
AGE: *3 years*
COLOR: *Brown / Chocolate*
SHELTER: *Humane Society of Sumter County*

FACTS

Spayed / Neutered
Vaccinations up to date
HW positive

Batman and Robin are a sweet, bonded pair who love yard adventures and each other's company. Both are being treated for non-contagious heartworms and just need a loving home to heal. With a little care, they'll be ready to bring double the love and joy.

BROTHER BAT MAN



ROGER

BREED: *Boxer & Labrador Retriever Mix*
GENDER: *Male*
AGE: *7 years*
COLOR: *Dark brown and white*
SHELTER: *Lake County Animal Shelter*

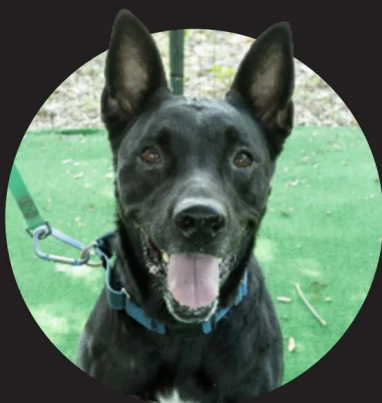
FACTS

Spayed / Neutered
Obsessed with lizards
Leashed trained
Happy demeanor
Attention seeking
Treat Motivated

Meet Roger, a sweet senior pup with the energy of a youngster! He loves playtime, craves attention, and never stops having fun. Roger knows how to sit and is always ready to show off his skills. His playful, loving nature is sure to brighten anyone's day!

During 'kitten season' – spring and summer – shelters are flooded with kittens, overwhelming their capacity.

**The most commonly surrendered dogs are large breeds like
Pit Bulls and German Shepherds.**



SAGE

BREED: *Shepherd, German Mix*

GENDER: *Female*

AGE: *5 years*

COLOR: *Black*

SHELTER: *Humane Society
of Sumter County*

FACTS

Good with kids

Loves a quiet place

Gentle

Sensitive

Sage is a gentle, shy dog who thrives in a calm, loving home. She's loyal, affectionate, and loves playing fetch with her favorite ball. Sage enjoys quiet moments but also needs mental stimulation to stay happy. If you want a sweet, playful companion, Sage could be the perfect match!



EARL

BREED: *Labrador Retriever
& Terrier Mix*

GENDER: *Male*

AGE: *Adult*

COLOR: *Black, White, Cream*

SHELTER: *Humane Society
of Lake County*

FACTS

Spayed / Neutered

Vaccinations up to date

Affectionate

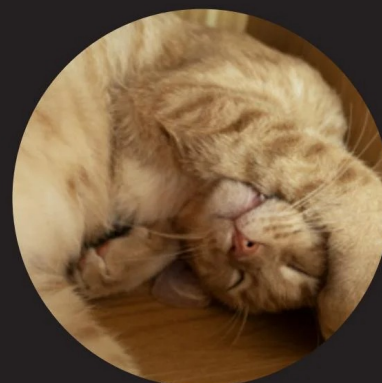
Playful

Curious

Good with children

Good with dogs

Meet Earl! This 2-year-old, 55-lb Lab/Terrier mix is full of charm, loves other dogs, and never says no to a toy. He's currently in a 10-week training program with The Greyhound Advancement Center, graduating August 8, 2025—and will be ready for his forever home!



ABNER

BREED: *Domestic Shorthair*

GENDER: *Male*

AGE: *Young*

COLOR: *Orange & White Tabby*

SHELTER: *Hoffmeyer
Animal Rescue*

FACTS

Spayed / Neutered

Vaccinations up to date

Independent & quiet

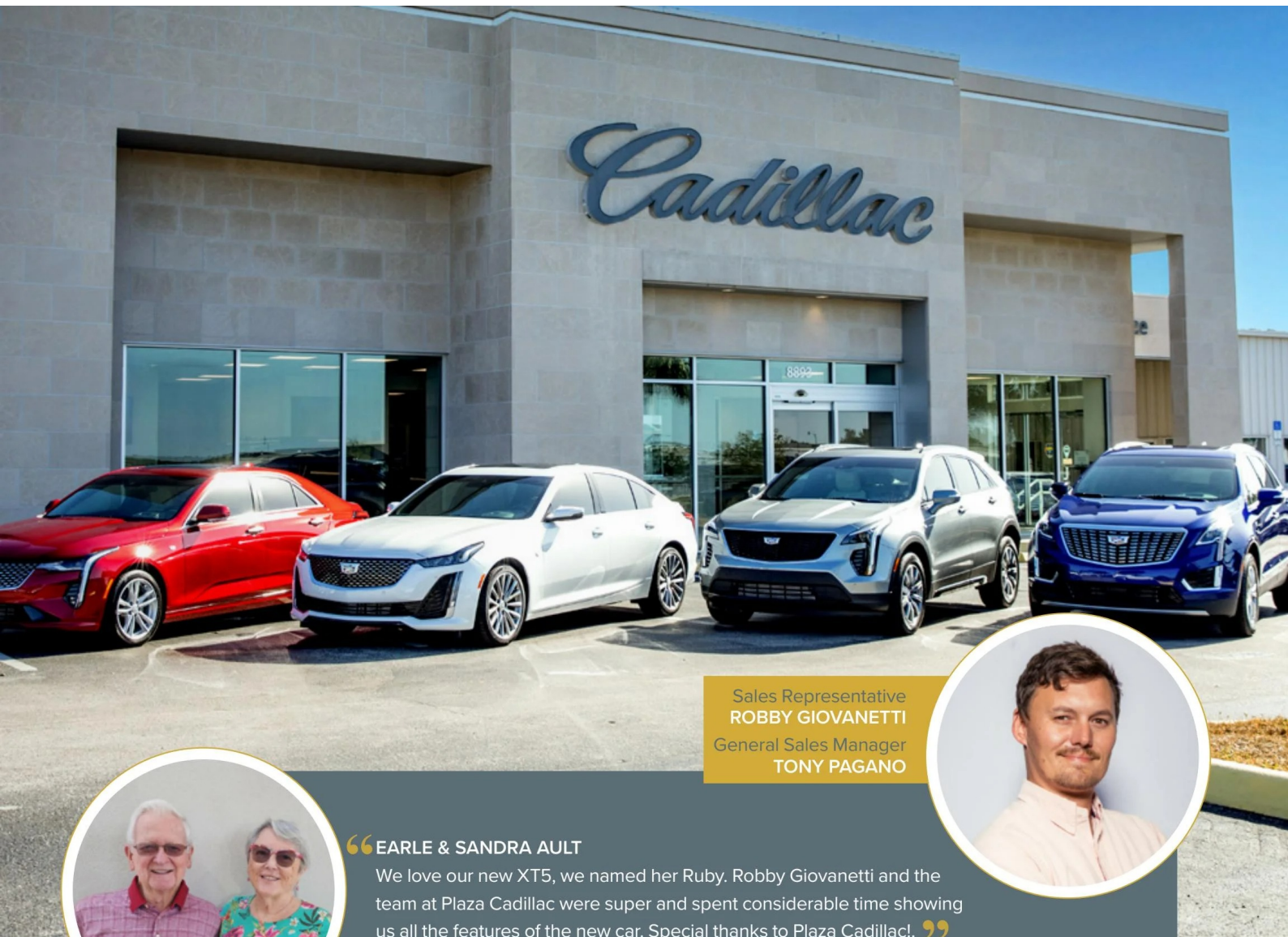
Gentle & friendly

Good with cats

House trained

Abner is a calm, independent 10-month-old who prefers lounging in a sunny window over being carried around. He enjoys occasional pets and is already over 10 lbs—likely to grow into a big boy! Fully vetted and ready for adoption. 🐾





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More Than Medicine

AdventHealth Waterman's ER delivers world-class care with compassion, faith—and a hometown heart.

PAID PROMOTIONAL FEATURE

When lives are on the line, trust matters. At AdventHealth Waterman's Emergency Department, patients aren't just treated for symptoms. They're cared for as whole people—body, mind and spirit—by a team that believes healing is more than clinical care. It's about compassion, collaboration and community.

"I am a practicing osteopathic physician, so whole-person care is already a cornerstone of how I practice so it fits in very nicely with AdventHealth's mission and I love that. It's one of the reasons I chose to work at AdventHealth," says Dr. Smolter, DO, Waterman's Medical Director of Emergency Medicine. "It's all about treating a patient's physical concerns, along with their emotional and spiritual concerns. That's pretty important."

Dr. Smolter came to Florida after completing her residency in emergency medicine and practicing for several years in

Pennsylvania. Since arriving in Lake County, she has been instrumental in shaping the department's medical leadership while also serving as Vice Chief of Staff.

Working hand-in-hand with her is Holly Kolozsvary, RN, the hospital's Nursing Director of Emergency Services. Together, they guide the fast-paced and high-stakes environment of the ER—not from behind closed doors, but as a visible, cohesive leadership team.

"Dr. Smolter and I work very closely in every aspect," says Holly. "From process improvement to patient throughput, we're constantly asking how we can make the experience better—for patients and staff."

That kind of synergy is one reason AdventHealth Waterman's Emergency Department has grown into one of the largest ER's in Lake County. Originally a modest seven-bed unit when Holly started in 1992, the ER now includes

58 beds, eight of which are pediatric-friendly, and three high-acuity resuscitation rooms designed for the sickest of the sick.

"We're truly the front door to the hospital," says Dr. Smolter. "People come to us with everything—chest pain, strokes, injuries, fevers or just because they're scared. Our team is trained and equipped to handle it all."

The Emergency Department is staffed by board-certified emergency physicians, physician assistants, and nurse practitioners along with a skilled team of nurses, paramedics, technicians and other professionals who care for patients of all ages using advanced tools like MRI, CT scans and on-site lab services.

"Our stroke and cardiac care are standouts," says Dr. Smolter. "We catch strokes quickly; we act fast and most of our cardiac and stroke patients are able to stay right here for care. Transfers are rare."

Seeing over 70,000 patients annually, the department's success is built not just on numbers or efficiency—but trust.

"I've lived in this community since 1992. This is where my family comes for care. It's where I come for care," Holly says. "And that matters. We have a stake in making this ER the best it can be, because we live here, too."

That commitment shows. The hospital's culture is

rooted in service, guided by the Christian values that define AdventHealth. It's not uncommon for a nurse to pray with a patient or for a family to ask for spiritual support in a time of crisis.

"Our patients expect to be treated like family, not just as a number," says Holly. "And they know this is a place where that's not only okay—it's encouraged."

The department has also evolved to serve a growing

number of pediatric patients in the area. In response, they've added child-friendly features and brought on a pediatric nurse practitioner to make younger patients and their families feel more at ease.

"We're always adjusting to meet the needs of the community," says Dr. Smolter. "That's what it means to be a true community hospital."

But community doesn't just mean proximity—it means collaboration. The ER team works closely with every department in the hospital, including critical care, cardiology, OB services, and beyond.

"From the moment a patient arrives—whether by ambulance or through the front door—our job is to figure out what's going on and guide them toward the right care, and as quickly as possible," says Holly.

That coordination between medical and nursing staff is more than professional—it's personal. And it shows in the confidence of the team and the trust of the patients.

Whether it's a routine illness, a complex emergency, or a moment of crisis that changes everything—the ER at AdventHealth Waterman is where neighbors care for neighbors. With every diagnosis, every decision, and every prayer offered, this team lives its mission of 'Extending the Healing Ministry of Christ.'

"There's not much Holly and I don't know about what's going on in this department," says Dr. Smolter with a smile. "That kind of partnership sets the tone. Our team knows we're in it together and that translates into better outcomes for our patients."

"We're not just here for emergencies," says Holly. "We're here for you."

For more information, visit AdventHealthWaterman.com.



352.253.3333 | AdventHealthWaterman.com
1000 Waterman Way, Tavares



CATS, CUDDLES and Cappuccinos

The atmosphere is purrrfect at the Orlando Cat Café in Clermont.

STORY: GINA HORAN × PHOTOS: NICOLE HAMEL AND PROVIDED

At first glance, the Orlando Cat Café seems like another coffee place tucked into a beautifully designed Central Florida retail plaza. The chalkboard signage and window art promise yummy beverages and baked goods, along with cute cat-themed décor.

But among the din of conversation and the hiss of the milk steamer, there's unmistakable feline energy afoot. Through an adjoining window, you can see an array of cats pawing at

toys between visitors' feet, lounging on couches or playing with each other. This isn't just a cat-themed café; it's a café for real, live cats, all of them waiting for forever homes.

"At their best, cat cafés are more than cute gimmicks, they're havens," says Jessica Whitehouse, director of community "purr-lations" and daily operations manager. "They're places where animal lovers gather, stress melts away with a single paw tap and shy cats blossom into their best selves."

For some visitors, interacting with the cats is therapeutic. For others, it's

life changing because they can adopt from this custom designed kitty lounge.

The cat café concept isn't new. It began in Taiwan in 1998 and spread to Japan in the early 2000s, where it exploded in popularity thanks to cramped apartments and strict pet policies. Since then, cafés have popped up in cities across the country, offering caffeine, community and adoptable cats in one Instagram-worthy package.

The Orlando Cat Café in Clermont became the first of its kind in Florida nearly a decade ago. It was founded by Sandra Cagan, a successful



businesswoman and self-described “dedicated feline enthusiast” who was approaching her 50th birthday and thinking about her next chapter.

“In my world, birthdays are for launching things,” Sandra says. “So, I decided to launch a business that could save lives.”

Sandra, a longtime real estate and property management professional, saw a news segment about Japan’s cat cafés and something clicked. She loved cats. She knew how to run a business. Why not blend the two?

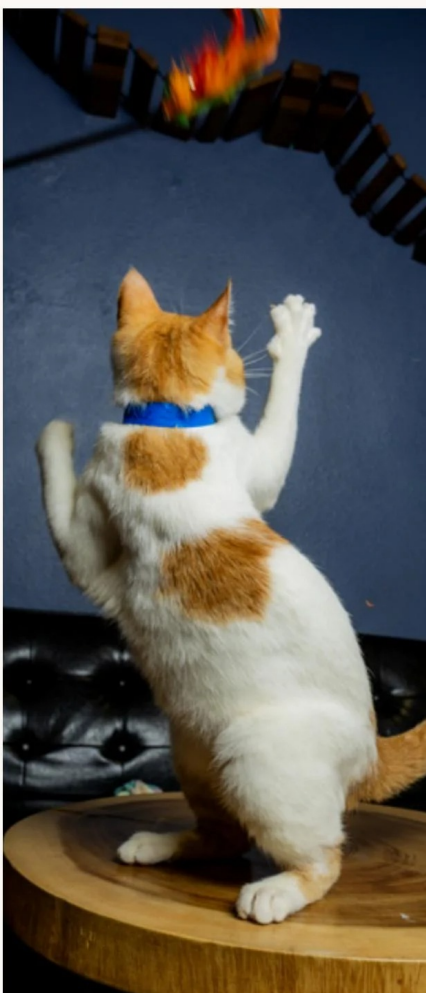
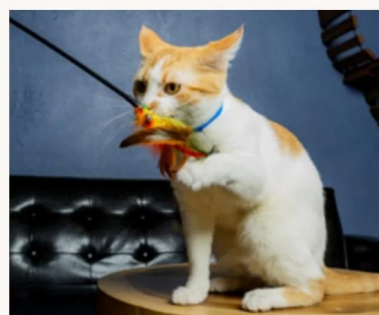
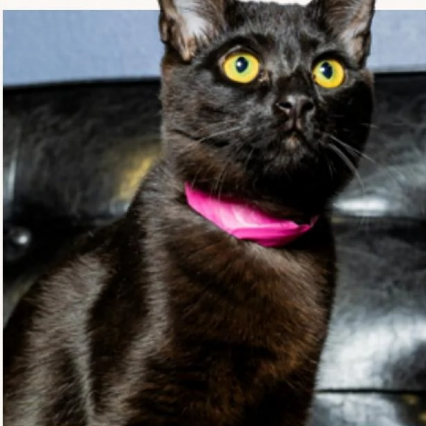
She brought in Jessica, then working with The Animal League, who was instrumental in forming their current partnership with SPCA Florida. In 2016, what began as a side project quickly grew into a full-time mission.

“It’s not just about the cats,” Sandra says. “It’s about the people who come here and find connection, calm and sometimes healing.”

Orlando Cat Café has placed more than 3,100 cats in loving homes since opening. Those adoptions resulted in an 18% increase in lives saved for their rescue partner, SPCA Florida.

The café operates through a three-pronged partnership with SPCA Florida, Cagan Management Group and Minch Coffee. Each contributes expertise in rescue, real estate and hospitality.

Minch Coffee also provides drinks and snacks, while SPCA Florida supplies the adoptable cats and trained volunteers who help staff the lounge,



Cat cafés are places where animal lovers gather, stress melts away with a single paw tap and shy cats blossom into their best selves.”

- Jessica Whitehouse

where 12 to 15 felines roam freely at any given time during business hours.

Sandra designed the space to be both cozy and safe, with a double-door vestibule to keep the cats secure and a separate HVAC system to help contain allergens. For guests with sensitivities, a full-length viewing window offers a chance to watch the action without stepping inside.

Adoptions are handled with care and every potential pet parent answers questions about their living situation. For example, 'Are there other animals in the home or will existing household dynamics impede a successful match?'

"Some people come in with absolutely no intention of adopting," Jessica says. "And then it just happens. They fall in love."

Eden LaClair knows the magic of a perfect match. A former Disney cast member turned full-time cat matchmaker, she now works at the café and runs its TikTok account. Many of her videos have gone viral.

"People come in and say, 'I have a shy 8-year-old male at home and I need a kitten that'll draw him out,'" Eden says. "I spend so much time with these cats that I know their personalities and love getting those matches just right."

She also coordinates alumni updates, staying in touch with adopters and sharing photos, stories and progress reports on their website.

One particular moment stands out for her.

"There was a little cat who wouldn't come out for weeks," she says. "Then one day, this woman walked in, sat down and the cat crawled into her lap. That was it. That was the moment."

Volunteer Irene Brady always enjoys giving her time. She even comes in early so she can play with the kitties before they open.

"I started right after they reopened from COVID," she says. "I told my husband that when I retired, I was going to volunteer."

For Marielle Shaw, the café became part of her healing journey.

"Last year, I had a liver transplant and nearly died," she says. "Being here took my mind off everything. It was an escape, and it helped me through a really rough time."

Sadie Gilliam, a regular from Winter Garden, drops by simply to soak in the atmosphere.

"They're so sweet," Sadie says. "Just sitting with the cats makes my day better."

"It'll be hard not to take them all home," laughs her friend, Marissa Hart. "Especially the kittens."

Sandra says stories like that keep her going.

"People really, really love cats," she says. "We see tourists missing their pets, kids who can't have cats at home, people going through something hard.

This place gives them a break. A little peace."

The café also regularly hosts events like yoga with cats, painting nights and seasonal fundraisers.

Guests may not realize that spending time with a cat helps it become more adoptable.

"We've had shy cats, cats with one eye, even cats missing limbs," Jessica says. "And they've all found homes."

Sandra takes no salary from the café. All profits go to SPCA Florida. She has since franchised the model and launched Orlando Cat Café Franchising. Director of Franchise Development Lisa Doroba is now fielding inquiries from across the country.

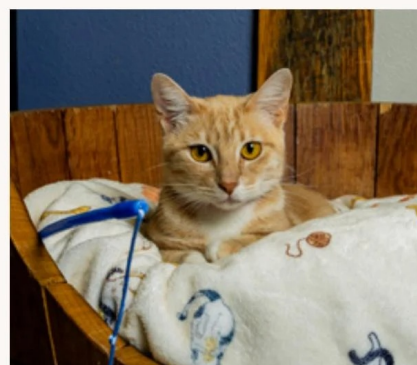
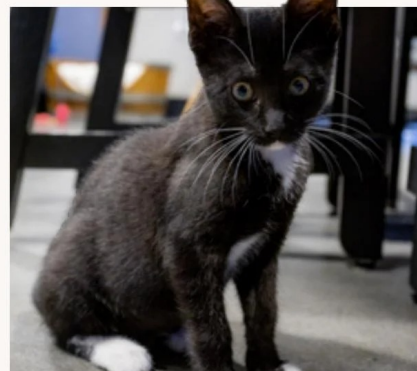
"There was no blueprint when we opened," Sandra says. "But I knew it could work. I wanted something that mattered and these beautiful little creatures absolutely matter." 🐾

For information about franchising contact Lisa: lisa@orlandocatcafe.com
532 Cagan Park Ave., Ste. 201-203
Clermont | 352.989.4820 |
www.orlandocatcafe.com

 **Orlando
Cat Cafe**
Where the Cool Cats Hang Out



Staff Writer Gina Horan melts after soul shaking, adorable kiss with world's cutest kitten. →



A DAY IN THE LIFE AT ORLANDO CAT CAFÉ

Running a cat café isn't all cuddles and cappuccinos, though there's a fair amount of both. Here's what a typical day looks like behind the scenes at Orlando Cat Café:

MORNING: PREP AND CARE

- Staff arrive early to feed the cats, check water bowls and give each feline a quick wellness check.
- Litter boxes are scooped, toys are refreshed, and the space is vacuumed and wiped down to keep it clean and odor-free.
- Fresh coffee and pastries are prepped in the café next door, and the first wave of reservations get set up.

MIDDAY: GUEST TIME AND ENRICHMENT

- As guests arrive, staff explain the rules (don't pick up the cats, no flash photos, let them come to you) and guide first-timers.
- Team members monitor interactions to ensure the cats are relaxed and happy, stepping in when a kitty needs a break.
- Throughout the day, toys are rotated to keep the cats stimulated. Some cats prefer window lounging, others chase wand toys – each gets a turn.
- Light tidying is constant: fur is swept, water bowls are rinsed, and food areas are wiped as needed.

AFTERNOON: EVENTS, NAPS AND MEET-CUTES

- Special events like yoga with cats, painting classes or story time happen in rotation. These events offer enrichment for both people and pets.
- The team continues matchmaking – gently suggesting cats with the right temperament for potential adopters.
- Staff answer questions, take photos (with permission) and manage adoption paperwork when matches are made.

EVENING: CLOSE AND RESET

- At day's end, the team deep cleans the space, restocks litter, toys and food, and double-checks every enclosure and cat.
- Medications, if needed, are administered.

- Lights go off with one last head count, making sure each kitty is healthy, safe and ready for another day.
- The care doesn't stop when the café closes. Every interaction helps socialize the cats, making them more adoptable. It's a full day of work – and every whiskered face is worth it.

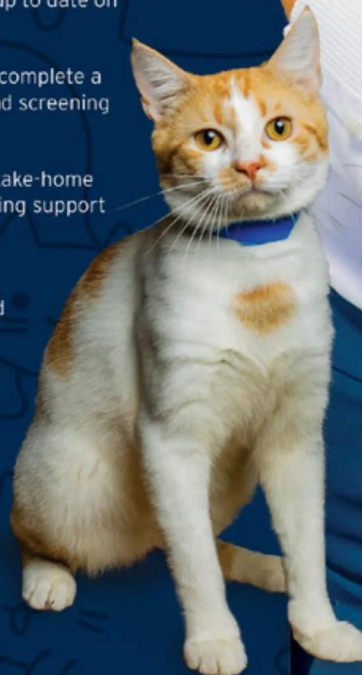
FEES, RULES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

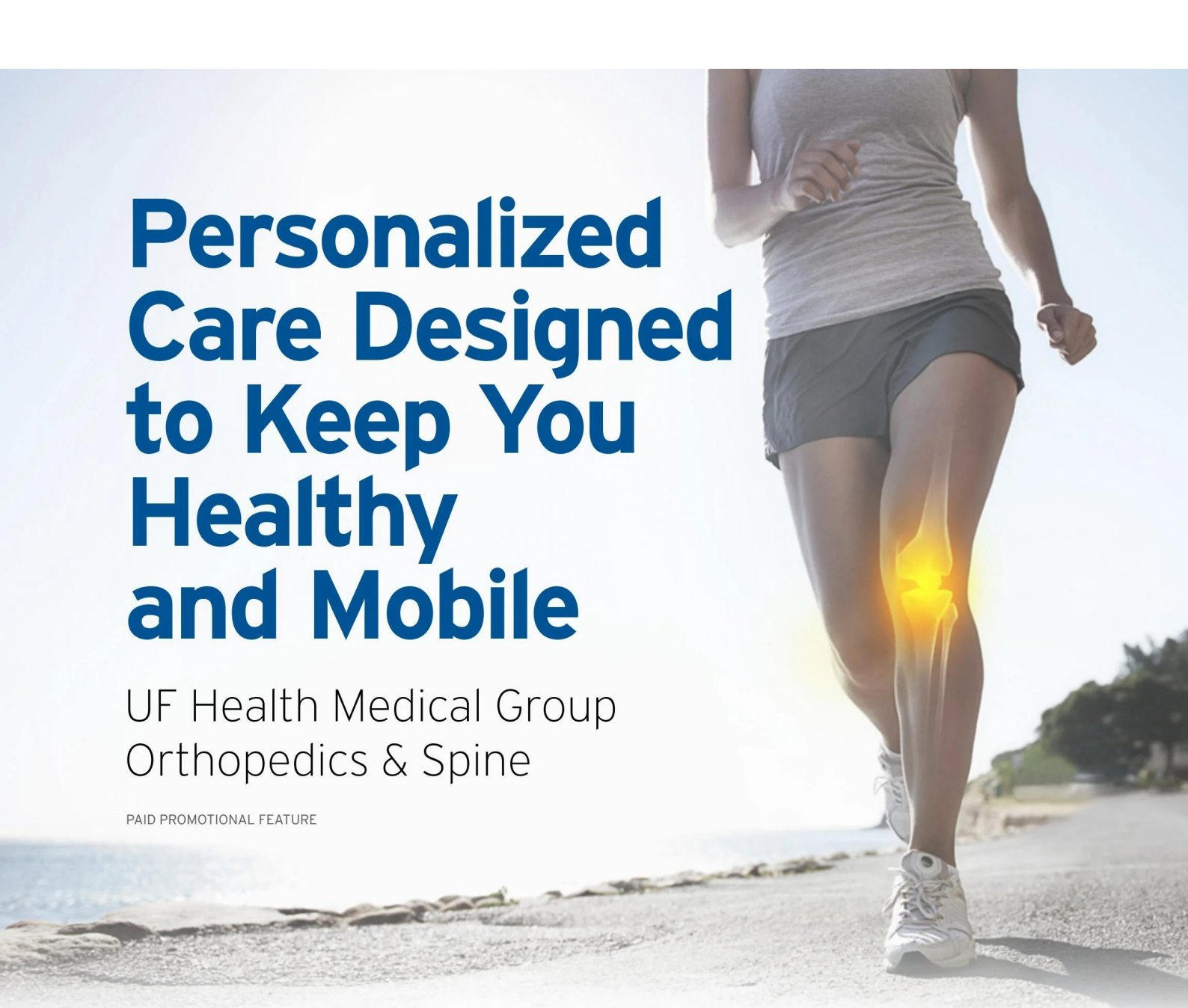
TO VISIT THE CAFÉ:

- **Adults:** \$12 per person, per hour
- **Children under 12:** \$10 per person, per hour
- Reservations recommended, especially on weekends
- Walk-ins allowed when space permits
- Includes full access to the cat play area; drinks sold separately at Minch Coffee

TO ADOPT A CAT:

- Adoption fees vary depending on age, breed and medical history
- All cats are spayed/neutered, microchipped and up to date on vaccinations
- Potential adopters complete a brief application and screening process
- Adoption includes take-home guidance and ongoing support from SPCA Florida
- Every dollar goes toward cat care and helps make future matches possible



A person is running on a paved path outdoors. A graphic of a glowing yellow knee is overlaid on the runner's right leg, highlighting the focus on joint health. The background shows a clear sky and some greenery.

Personalized Care Designed to Keep You Healthy and Mobile

UF Health Medical Group
Orthopaedics & Spine

PAID PROMOTIONAL FEATURE

Whatever stage of life you're in — whether you're enjoying an active retirement, juggling the demands of raising a family, or focused on advancing your career — staying mobile is essential to maintaining your independence and quality of life. When pain or limited movement interferes with your daily routine, it can affect everything from your ability to work and exercise to spending time with loved ones.

Orthopaedic and spine conditions are among the most common reasons people seek medical care,

ranging from acute injuries and accidents to chronic issues like arthritis, herniated discs or joint degeneration.

Understanding the widespread impact of these conditions, UF Health Medical Group Orthopaedics & Spine has built a dedicated team of experienced, highly trained specialists to meet the needs of the growing Central Florida community. With a focus on advanced techniques, personalized treatment plans and a commitment to restoring function and improving lives, this team is expert at helping patients be at their best.

With locations in The Villages, Leesburg and Tavares, providers rotate between offices according to appointments, and the practice serves both UF Health Leesburg Hospital and UF Health Spanish Plaines Hospital.

Over the past 18 months, UF Health Central Florida has expanded its services in response to the growing needs of the community in Lake, Sumter and Marion counties. During this time, the number of providers and practices in the area has nearly doubled, including the addition of a dedicated orthopaedics and

“My goal is to take away pain and help patients stay active and independent, doing what they love for as long as they can.”

Ali Zarezadeh, MD
Spine Surgeon



spine team. This expansion has allowed UF Health to offer a more comprehensive range of care, and the organization remains focused on continuing to strengthen and grow these services to better serve the region.

With board-certified experts in all main subspecialties, you can feel confident in having direct access to the best care for your specific injury or condition.

It's typically when something goes wrong — whether a sudden injury or a chronic condition — that we seek medical care. At the same time, we want the assurance that providers see us as more than just the problem that brought us through the practice doors.

The team at UF Health has developed a reputation for treating the whole person — not just the specific issue. Their attention to detail and compassion result in patient-centered care at its finest, designed to help you move forward in health.



ORTHOPAEDIC CONCERNS

When it comes to orthopaedic and musculoskeletal problems, UF Health Medical Group is prepared to address all related concerns, including:

- Joint reconstruction and replacement
- Hip replacement (anterior approach)
- Neck and back pain
- Arthritis and degenerative joint disease
- Foot and ankle
- Hand and upper extremity care
- Sports medicine services
- Injury prevention, diagnosis and treatment
- Fracture care
- Spine conditions
- On-site physical therapy
- Radiological services

Some of the most common orthopaedic surgeries are to repair or replace joints and ligaments that are damaged or simply worn out. Topping the list are shoulders, hips and knees.

There has been a significant demand for anterior hip replacement surgery, as many patients are eager to avoid long waiting lists. UF Health is meeting this need by utilizing the latest technology and advanced surgical techniques to provide high-quality care. Patients benefit from next-day appointments and a fast turnaround for scheduled procedures, often allowing them to stand and begin walking either the same day or the day after surgery.

UF Health offers both traditional and minimally invasive surgical techniques. Advances in technology, including robotic-assisted surgery, have decreased the amount of time patients stay in the hospital post-surgery. Less invasive techniques also mean shorter recovery times and less pain.

The goal is for every patient to be home as quickly as possible and feeling their best even sooner than they might expect.

UFHealth
MEDICAL GROUP
ORTHOPAEDICS

SPINE CARE

Thanks to having one of the most established spine care programs in the Southeast, UF Health can treat a wide range of conditions involving the spine, including nerves, back, shoulder and neck, such as:

- Degenerative disc disease
- Spinal stenosis
- Spondylosis
- Spondylolisthesis
- Herniated disc
- Failed back syndrome
- Spine deformity
- Spinal tumors and metastatic spine disease
- Osteoporotic spinal fracture
- Sciatica
- Radiculopathy
- Myelopathy

At UF Health, our team combines advanced surgical options – including minimally invasive techniques and OARM technology – with a comprehensive, conservative approach to care, prioritizing non-surgical solutions whenever possible to help you get back to your best.

It's not unusual to have back pain because you've pulled a muscle on the pickleball court or overdone it on a vacation hike. In fact, 80 percent of adults will experience back or neck pain at some point in life. Such temporary soreness is a different story altogether from chronic back or neck pain that is so debilitating it negatively impacts your quality of life.

If you find yourself changing your schedule and avoiding favorite activities because of back or neck pain, it's time to seek expert help.

The team at UF Health Medical Group Orthopaedics & Spine will address your individual concerns and fully explain all options for nonsurgical and surgical treatments, including interventional spine procedures and surgery. Rest assured that if spine surgery is the ultimate decision, you can rely on proven surgeons and the latest medical technologies.

Your health and peace of mind are always top priorities. Whether you're facing surgery or a conservative approach, all options will be fully explained so you can make informed decisions about your care.

It's not just about diagnosis and treatment. A big part of health and wellbeing is knowing how to prevent future injuries. Don't hesitate to ask questions and discuss your concerns about staying mobile and healthy.

352.323.5665



UF HEALTH MEDICAL GROUP ORTHOPAEDICS, TAVARES

2051 Mayo Dr., Tavares



UF HEALTH MEDICAL GROUP ORTHOPAEDICS, SPANISH SP RINGS

1501 US Hwy. 441, Bldg. 1800,
Ste. 1832, The Villages



UF HEALTH MEDICAL GROUP ORTHOPAEDICS, LEESBURG

701 Medical Plaza Drive, Leesburg

ON-SITE CONVENIENCE

When you're dealing with an injury or are post-surgery and trying to get back in action, physical therapy and radiography are typically part of the routine.

At UF Health Medical Group Orthopaedics & Spine, patients appreciate the fact that physical therapy is offered in the same location where clinic appointments are scheduled.

You don't have to go to a different location for therapy, which is a big time saver, not to mention less stress. This is especially helpful if you're not able to drive at the time and are relying on family, friends or other means of transport to get to and from appointments.

For added convenience, X-ray and ultrasound services are also available onsite at all UF Health locations in Central Florida.

UF Health Medical Group Orthopaedics & Spine is currently accepting new patients.

SAME DAY AND NEXT DAY APPOINTMENTS ARE AVAILABLE.

To schedule an appointment, call the CareConnect Center at 352.323.5665. In addition to answering questions, they are able to book appointments on the spot.

For the utmost in personal attention, your own patient navigator will make sure you're scheduled for all the services you need.



NaviGATORS
GUIDING YOU TO BETTER HEALTH

DEDICATED TO PROVIDING ONE-ON-ONE
SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE THROUGHOUT
YOUR INDIVIDUAL HEALTH EXPERIENCE.

352.323.5633

GET TO KNOW OUR EXPERTS

UF Health Medical Group is home to a skilled team of expert physicians who develop individualized treatment plans that put patients first for the best possible outcomes.



PAUL MAHLE, MD
GENERAL ORTHOPAEDICS

Fellowship trained in Adult Reconstruction

Dr. Mahle specializes in minimally invasive and robotic hip and knee replacements, including complex revision surgeries. "It's incredibly rewarding to see patients go from pain and limitation to walking, golfing and enjoying life again," says Dr. Mahle, a Central Florida native who joined UF Health in 2024.



ISSAC MITCHELL, MD
GENERAL ORTHOPAEDICS

Fellowship trained in Sports Medicine - Shoulder

Dr. Mitchell specializes in sports medicine and shoulder care. He and his family have lived in Leesburg since 2003, and he's known as a mentor to local students with an interest in medicine. "I'm invested in helping this community thrive, both in and out of the clinic," says Dr. Mitchell.



JON RADNOTHY, DO
GENERAL ORTHOPAEDICS

Specializes in Total Joint

Dr. Radnothy specializes in robotic, tendon-sparing joint replacements of the hip, knee and shoulder, general orthopedics and sports medicine. "Patients come in for their one-year follow-up and are so fired up because we not only restore a hip or a knee, but their lives," says Dr. Radnothy, who has practiced in Lake County since 1993 and had a successful orthopedic practice for years before joining UF Health in 2023.



CEDRIC TANKSON, MD
GENERAL ORTHOPAEDICS

Fellowship trained in Sports Medicine - Foot & Ankle

Dr. Tankson specializes in foot and ankle issues but also treats general orthopaedics and injuries. "There are certain illnesses you can only manage, but with orthopaedics, you can actually restore someone back to their prior function before their injury," says Dr. Tankson, noting that this is one reason he was drawn to the field.



ALI ZAREZADEH, MD
SPINE SURGEON

Fellowship trained in Spine Surgery and Orthopaedic Oncology

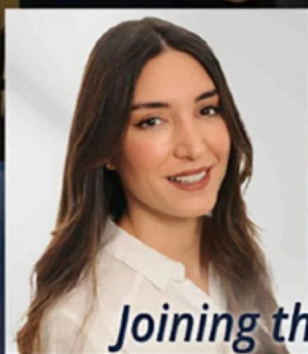
Dr. Zarezadeh specializes in complex spine conditions, including degenerative disease, deformity, tumors and traumatic injuries. "My goal is to take away pain and help patients stay active and independent, doing what they love for as long as they can," says Dr. Zarezadeh, a UF graduate and proud Gator fan, who is thrilled to be back in Florida following two years at the University of Colorado.

“It's incredibly rewarding to see patients go from pain and limitation to walking, golfing and enjoying life again.”

Paul Mahle, MD
General Orthopaedics

UFHealth
MEDICAL GROUP
ORTHOPAEDICS

352.323.5665
www.UFHealth.org/uf-health-orthopaedics-central-florida



Joining this Fall!

Madeleine Yehia, MD

Gabrielle Turski, MD

Our Team of Doctors, Top Left to Bottom Right:
 Luis G. León-Alvarado, MD; S.K. Steven Houston III, MD, FASRS;
 Thalmon R. Campagnoli, MD; Thomas A. Barnard, MD;
 Jaya B. Kumar, MD, FASRS; Nisarg P. Joshi, MD;
 Elias C. Mavrofrides, MD; and Matthew A. Cunningham, MD, FASRS

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 Wildwood, FL 34785
 352.612.9006

4880 North Highway 19A
 Mount Dora, FL 32757
 352.357.1203

2270 East Highway 50
 Clermont, FL 34711
 352.243.0716



FloridaRetinaInstitute.com

AGENDA

EVENTS
TRAVEL
PEOPLE

LOCAL TALENT

Old-school crooner and funny man Frank Pisani wowed national audiences, now The Villages gets the encore of a lifetime.

58





2025

July

HOLIDAY

Let Freedom Ring

Stars, stripes and sunshine are taking over as Lake and Sumter Counties celebrate our nation's independence this Fourth of July. From backyard barbecues and local parades to booming fireworks shows and lakeside music, there's no shortage of ways to celebrate.

→ July 3 @ 4-10pm / Mount Dora / Freedom on the Waterfront / Elizabeth Evans Park

July 4 @ 10am / Mount Dora / Independence Day Parade / Donnelly Park

July 4 @ 4-9:30pm / Leesburg / Star Spangled Spectacular / Ski Beach

July 4 @ 4:45pm / Tavares / Parade and Celebration / Wooton Park

July 4 @ 4-9pm / The Villages / Independence Day Celebration / Brownwood Paddock Square

July 4 @ 5-9pm / Clermont / Red, White & Boom! / Waterfront Park

July 4 @ 4-9pm / Groveland / Independence Day Celebration / Lake David Park

JULY
4

EVENT

Dash for Freedom

Enjoy your Independence Day at the 6th Annual AdventHealth Clermont Freedom 5K in downtown Clermont. Whether you run, walk or race virtually, this family-friendly event is a fun and festive way to start the holiday.

→ Downtown Clermont near City Hall / 685 W. Montrose St. / 7:30am start / Clermontfreedom5K.com/FloDashEvents / 407.230.8756


AdventHealth
JULY
9

EVENT

WETLAND WONDERS

Join Water Wednesday in Tavares to explore Florida's wetlands and learn how native plant life supports these vital ecosystems. Discover how to identify native species during this hands-on, sustainable activity.

→ Hickory Point Recreation Park / 27341 SR 19, Tavares / 10am / 352.901.0440

ONGOING EVENTS Events are subject to change and cancellation.

EVERY WEEKEND

Lakeridge Winery
presents: Weekends at
the Winery
10am-5pm Sat.
11am-5pm Sun.
19239 US 27, Clermont

EVERY MON

Webster
Farmers Market
6am-2pm
524 N. Market Blvd.,
Webster

EVERY TUE

Lady Lake
Farmers Market
9am-2pm
250 Rolling Acres Rd.,
Lady Lake

EVERY THU

Lake County Farmers
and Flea Market
8am-noon
2101 N. CR 452,
Eustis

1ST FRI

Eustis First Friday
6-9pm
Downtown Eustis

1ST FRI

Clermont First Friday
Food Trucks
5:30-9pm
685 W. Montrose St.,
Clermont

EVERY SUN

Downtown Clermont
Farmers Market
9am-2pm
Downtown Clermont





july ON STAGE

Enjoy quality entertainment on the many stages of Lake and Sumter counties.

GENERATIONAL LAUGHS

Saturday 7/26 @ 7pm

Catch father-son comedy duo Marty and Charlie Nadler live at The Sharon for familial fun and hereditary hijinks. Hollywood veteran and patriarch Marty wrote for TV classics like Happy Days and we, while Charlie tours nationally as a comic and writer. Their show blends stand-up with stories from both sides of the generational divide, ending in a lively Q&A where the audience can ask about life in showbiz and what it's like entertaining as a family.

Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center

Spanish Springs Town Square / 1051 Main St, The Villages / 352.751.7799 / www.thesharon.com

EVENT

CHROME AND CLASSICS

Rev up your weekend at the Eustis Classic Car Cruise-In when it rolls into downtown 4-8pm. Eyeball vintage rides, swap stories with fellow car buffs and soak up the retro charm of this beloved local tradition.

→ 250 Ferran Park Dr., Eustis

**JULY
26**



EVENT

Wine Down Weekends

Spend Saturday or Sunday (or both days!) at Lakeridge Winery sipping your favorite wines at the outdoor bar, enjoying live entertainment and delicious food and relaxing on the vineyard green. Festivities run Saturdays 10am-5pm and Sundays 11am-5pm. Don't forget to bring your lawn chairs!

→ Lakeridge Winery / 19239 US Hwy. 27, Clermont / 352.394.8627 / lakeridgewinery.com



Let us help you get the word out!

→ To have an event considered for the calendar, send a short text description along with a color photo (if available) 45 days in advance of event to: calendar@akersmediagroup.com or Lake & Sumter Style Calendar, P.O. Box 490088, Leesburg, FL 34749

ONGOING EVENTS Events are subject to change and cancellation.

MON & FRI NIGHTS

**Car Shows
in The Villages**
5-8pm

Lake Sumter Landing &
Brownwood Paddock Square

EVERY FRI

Groveland Farmers Market
9am-1pm
Lake David Park

EVERY SUN

**Downtown Mount Dora
Village Market**
9am-2pm
Downtown Mount Dora

SECOND SAT

Plaid in the Park
5-9pm
230 W. 4th Ave., Mount Dora

EVERY SAT

**Spanish Springs
Mercado Outdoor
Market & Music**
9am-2pm

1ST & 3RD WEEK

**Market Night
in The Villages**
5-9pm
Tue-Spanish Springs
Wed-Lake Sumter
Thu-Brownwood

julyJAMS

Move to the beat of your favorite performers at these great concerts or local venues!

Are you in a band and want to be included in our monthly calendar?

→ Email us at gina@akersmediagroup.com.

7/3 @ 7pm

AMERICA'S SWEETHEARTS

The Sharon, The Villages

7/5 @ 3pm

BELOUIS SOME

Mount Dora Music Hall, Mount Dora

7/5 @ 7pm

THE ALARM

Mount Dora Music Hall, Mount Dora

7/7 @ 2pm

ROB NICHOLS

Dirty South Saloon, Leesburg

7/11 @ 7pm

TONIGHT'S THE NIGHT: THE

ROD STEWART TRIBUTE

The Savannah Center, The Villages

7/12 @ 7pm

GROOVE 41

City Fire, Brownwood, The Villages

7/12 @ 7pm

KISS ALIVE: THE TRIBUTE,

The Savannah Center, The Villages

7/13 @ 4pm

BILLY BUCHANAN

Edna's on the Green, Wildwood

7/13 @ 7pm

TOMMY TREADWAY

GarVino's, Lake Sumter Landing, The Villages

7/13 @ 7pm

SIMPLY TINA: THE ULTIMATE

TINA TURNER TRIBUTE

The Savannah Center, The Villages

7/17 @ 7pm

TURNSTILES: THE ULTIMATE

TRIBUTE TO BILLY JOEL

The Savannah Center, The Villages

7/19 @ 6pm

SOUTHBOUND

Village of Faith, The Villages

7/19 @ 6pm

ROUNDAABOUTS FLORIDA BAND

The Loyal Order of the Moose, Leesburg

7/19 @ 7pm

THE AMERICAN STONES

The Savannah Center, The Villages

7/20 @ 7pm

IN THE AIR TONIGHT: THE MUSIC

OF PHIL COLLINS & GENESIS

The Savannah Center, The Villages

7/26 @ 7pm

FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE

Orange Blossom Opry, Weirsdale

7/27 @ 7pm

J. ALAN LIVE

Orange Blossom Opry, Weirsdale

7/28 @ 1pm

ROB NICHOLS

The View, Clermont

8/3 @ 7pm

SHADES OF BUBLÉ

Cascades of Groveland, Groveland

ONGOING EVENTS

Events are subject to change and cancellation.

2ND SAT

**Main Street
Classic Car Show**

5-9pm
510 W. Main St., Leesburg

4TH SAT

**Eustis Classic Car
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LOCAL TALENT

PEOPLE

Still Stealing the Show

Villages entertainer shows that heart—not age—keeps the spotlight shining bright.

STORY: ROXANNE BROWN × PHOTO: NICOLE HAMEL

Frank Pisani isn't just any 90-year-old. He's a singer, comedian, impressionist—and a man with more charm, warmth and wit than entertainers half his age. Originally from Chicago, Frank's start in show business

began in college, when a side job as an usher at WGN-TV landed him on a local version of American Bandstand. He sang "Sha-Boom" to a room full of kids waiting to be in the audience, and the producer liked what he heard. That led to his first record, Crybaby, and a career that spanned decades.

As lead singer of The Highlights, Frank charted on Billboard with "City of Angels" and later "Angry." He toured with Dick Clark, appeared on The Arthur Godfrey Show, and even recorded at Chess Records in Chicago—home to Muddy Waters and Etta James.

He even spent time in the studio with a Rock & Roll Hall of Fame band that produced R&B classics: "Sincerely," "Most of All" and "Ten Commandments of Love."

"I recorded with Harvey and the Moonglows," he recalls. "It was an exciting time."

When his hearing began to fade, Frank expanded his talents and pivoted from singing to comedy and impressions. He starred in festivals and corporate events, performed on cruise lines and even portrayed Tony Bennett in a Rick Springfield film. One of his favorite memories? Hosting his own show—Johnny Angel and the Girls of the Galaxy—at the Seattle World's Fair.

Now in The Villages, Frank still makes people smile and shares his

passion for performance in new ways. With improved hearing aids and a tech-savvy spark (or that of his grandson), Frank brings his joy to the internet. On Facebook, you'll find him reworking well-known melodies with humorous or heartfelt lyrics of his own. A Christmas song recently earned 50,000 views.

Through it all, Frank credits his wife, JoAnne, as his rock.

"I married her because she could drive at night," he jokes, adding that her award-winning cooking skills and joyful personality didn't hurt either.

"We met when I was doing a show in Connecticut. She was 20 years younger, beautiful, smart and she laughed at my jokes. What more could I ask for?" Frank says with a tinge of melancholy. "But really, I knew—even if I only got five happy years, it'd be worth it. That was almost 50 years ago."

They married in 1976, raised two daughters and now cherish every moment with their grandchildren. Frank is grateful for the life he's lived—whether performing in the fast-paced world of showbiz or enjoying the quieter rhythm of The Villages, still doing what he loves . . . even if the spotlight is a little smaller.

"This isn't about ego," Frank says. "It's about connection, music and laughter. That's how we get through life." @



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Tony Thomas, Harry & Matt Tomlinson

SWINGING CLUBS FOR BATS

@ **SORRENTO** × **PHOTOS: ANTHONY RAO**

The 7th Annual David Lee Memorial Golf Tournament to raise money for the Eustis High Baseball program took place in February at Eagle Dunes Golf Club in Sorrento. The event included a silent auction of gifts donated by local businesses, a raffle and accolades for the longest drive, closest to the pin and best putting. @

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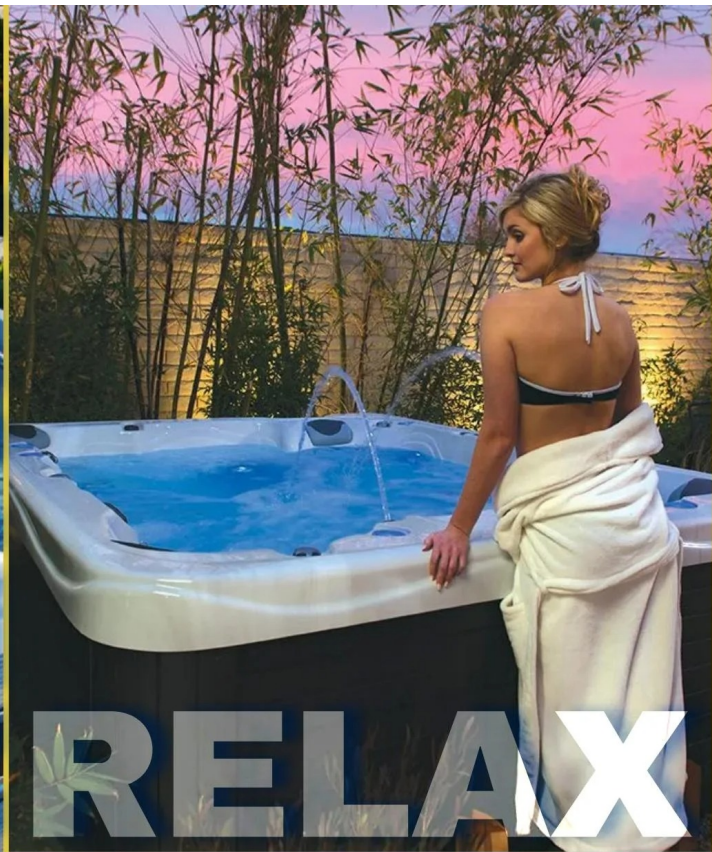
LEGACY OF LOVE

@ FRUITLAND PARK × PHOTOS: ROXANNE BROWN

Project Legacy held its annual “Giving Hearts Day” celebration at Heritage Community Church in Fruitland Park in February. The event honored donors and recognized nonprofits serving local children, youth and teens. Guests enjoyed updates on future initiatives and a performance by the Fruitland Park Elementary Chorus. Board members Crystal Mathis and Michael Hux reflected on the group’s impact and commitment to creating a stronger, more welcoming community through partnerships and support for young people. @

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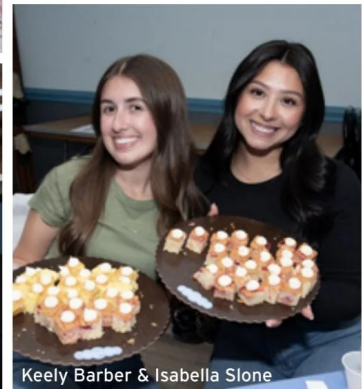
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SIPS, SAMPLES AND SMILES

@ LEESBURG × PHOTOS: NICOLE HAMEL

Food lovers and business leaders gathered at The Venetian Center in February for the 7th Annual Taste of Lake & Business Expo, hosted by the Leesburg Area Chamber of Commerce. Guests sampled tastes from local favorites while enjoying live music, beer and networking. Seafood Shack took home Best Appetizer, UF Health Leesburg Hospital earned Best Entrée, and Sweet Little Treasures wowed with Best Dessert. Beef O'Brady's poured the Best Beverage, Gourmet Today claimed the People's Choice Award and SouthState Bank impressed with Best Decorated Booth. @

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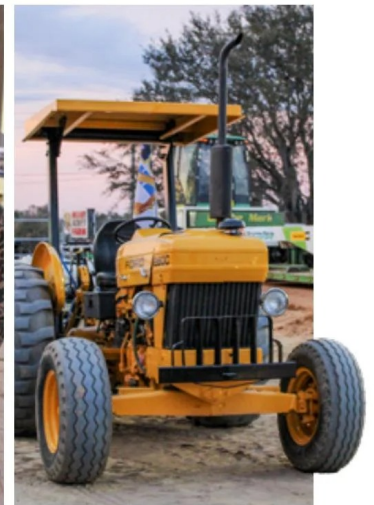
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A CENTURY TO CELEBRATE

@ **FRUITLAND PARK** × **PHOTOS: MATTHEW GAULIN**

Fruitland Park roared to life in February when the city celebrated its 100th birthday with its very first tractor pull at Windy Acres Arena on Miller Boulevard. Attendees were treated to a thrilling lineup of events featuring Blown Mini Rods, 2WD and 4WD trucks, Regional Mods, Semis and Hot Farm Tractors. The event sanctioned by the Mid Florida Tractor Pullers Association and the Pro Pulling League combined raw power with family-friendly fun. The celebration also featured food trucks, live music and entertainment for all ages. @



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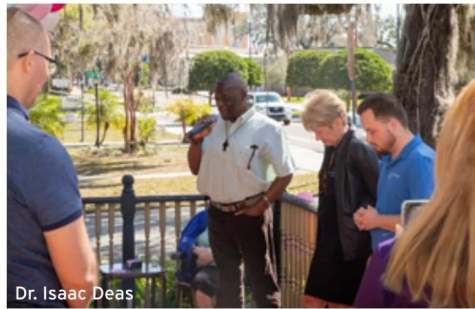
Ribbon Cutting for Deb Jayne's Bases Loaded & Booby Trap



Carla Garcia with Verde Vin



Deb Jayne



Dr. Isaac Deas



Gary Sligh with Fabric Arts



Joa Jane Harpster with Lah-Tea-Dah



Susan Cossette with Spinning/Felting

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FULL HOUSE

@ LEESBURG × PHOTOS: TRAVIS HAJENGA

Downtown Leesburg marked the arrival of six new businesses under one roof with a grand celebration in February. The event welcomed Bases Loaded Consulting Group/The Booby Trap Foundation, Gary Lee Sligh Fabric Arts, Lah-Tea-Dah, Bowling-For-You, Sheep Thrills Yarn and Verde Vin Plant Shop. The celebration featured a festive atmosphere with a prayer to bless the new ventures. A highlight of the event was a pair of ribbon-cutting ceremonies that officially commemorated the launch of these diverse enterprises in the heart of Leesburg. @

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CRUISING FOR A CURE

@ THE VILLAGES × PHOTOS: NICOLE HAMEL

The Villages community showed up with heart and purpose for the first-ever Kids Beating Cancer fundraiser at The Savannah Center. The sold-out, cruise-themed luncheon, fashion show and live auction brought together more than 430 guests to raise money for children fighting cancer. Guests browsed vendor booths, cheered on local models, including The Silver Rockets, and were moved by a young survivor's story. Led by Leslie Skillman, the Villages chapter is already making a difference, continuing the mission started by founder Margaret Guedes—in memory of her son—to keep care local and give kids the best shot at beating cancer. For more information or to donate, visit kidsbeatingcancer.com. @

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Mount Dora's Tymir
Gaines runs the ball with
"Beast Mode" mentality,
channeling the NFL
great who inspired him.

74



PEOPLE

TYMIR GAINES

Mount Dora running back emerging as one of Florida's top senior playmakers.

STORY: KYLE COPPOLA × PHOTOS: NICOLE HAMEL AND JOE OTT

Tymir Gaines isn't just one of Florida's most explosive high school football players—he's a young man with a mission to turn family legacy into personal greatness. The Mount Dora High School senior is coming off a breakout junior season that saw him average 8.1 yards per carry and rack up 2,237 all-purpose yards and 26 touchdowns. With electric speed, powerful vision and a relentless drive, Tymir has become the heart of the Hurricanes' offense and one of the top returning talents in the state.

But his path to the endzone wasn't always so clear.

"When I was about 6 or 7, I started out playing football on the offensive line," Tymir recalls with a smile. "Eventually the coaches said I was too small, so they started moving me around—and one game at running back, I scored five touchdowns. That's when I knew I found my spot."

Since then, Tymir has been nothing short of a force. Whether it's burning defenders down the sideline, lowering his shoulder between the tackles or catching passes out of the backfield, his versatility makes him nearly impossible to game-plan against.

Mount Dora Head Coach Luke Hutchinson calls Tymir a game changer, not only for his stats, but for his mindset.

"Tymir is a special kind of player," says Coach Hutchinson. "He has that rare combination of talent and work ethic. He's the kind of guy who shows up early, stays late and leads by example. What sets him apart is how much he genuinely

loves the game and how much he wants to represent his family and community the right way."

That love for the game is rooted in his upbringing. Tymir credits his family, especially his mother, Ashley Griffin for her unwavering support. He also points to his father, Victor Gaines, Jr., as a major motivator who always pushes him to be his best.

His uncles have also played significant roles in his life, especially Uncle Petey, who was a high school football standout in his day. He once held scholarship offers from top programs like Florida State but never made it to the collegiate level.

"Uncle Petey made a mistake, and I want to carry that dream forward,"



Tymir says. "I want to make it far, not just for me, but for him."

Another uncle, Fred Griffin Jr., has had a profound influence on Tymir's spiritual growth, encouraging him to stay grounded, remain positive and lead with humility. "He tells me to keep God first and everything else will fall into place," Tymir says.

Off the field, Tymir is equally impressive. He's a key member of Mount Dora High's track team, competing in the 100m, 200m and 4 x 100m relay. This past spring, he ran on the record-breaking 4x100m relay team alongside D'Micah Lowman, Zyshonne Perry and Jonathan Wilson, that clocked a 43.79 to break a 20-year-old Mount Dora High School record.

As he heads into his senior season, Tymir reflects fondly on all he's done. His favorite memory? Scoring his first varsity touchdown against Leesburg High. Another? A 300-yard, five-touchdown performance against rival Eustis High School.

His inspiration on the field is none other than NFL great Marshawn Lynch, famously known as "Beast Mode." Lynch is a former professional football player and American actor who spent 12 seasons in the NFL as a running back, most notably with the Seattle Seahawks.

"I love how Marshawn ran the ball" Tymir says. "He was fearless. That's how I try to play. 'Beast Mode' isn't just a saying to me. It's a mindset."

Looking ahead, Tymir hopes to continue playing football at the collegiate level while he majors in sports management or sports science. His message to younger athletes is one of humility and diligence.

"Work hard, listen to your coaches and trust your teammates," he says. "Hard work pays off. And remember, it's not always about being the biggest or fastest, it's about heart." ®



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KYLE COPPOLA

PEOPLE

VIVIANA TOUCET

One tryout. One coach's belief. One Villages High girl's mission to make it count.

STORY: KYLE COPPOLA × PHOTO: PROVIDED BY HOWIE MCCORMICK

For Viviana Toucet, a senior at The Villages High School, volleyball wasn't always part of the plan.

In fact, Sumter County, Florida was not part of the plan until 8-year-old Viviana and her family, originally from Puerto Rico, moved to the area when her mother Dianne Martinez got a job at The Villages Regional Hospital.

"Originally I thought I was going to play basketball," Viviana says with a laugh. "Villages Coach Michele Moreman saw me in middle school and encouraged me to try out for volleyball. I didn't know anything about the sport, but she believed in me and eventually, I started getting good at it."

Viviana is coming off a breakout junior season in which she led The Villages Charter School in kill shots with 190 along with 16 blocks last season.

Viviana's drive goes beyond the court. She's active in track & field, and she's also involved with Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), an organization she credits with helping her become a leader and influence others through her faith.

"My mom Dianne, my sisters Giuiliana and Adriana, Coach Moreman and Villages assistant coach Skylar Martin, they're my biggest mentors," Viviana says. "My

mom is my best friend. She's always been there, showing me how to serve others while taking care of myself, and always reminding me that it's all part of God's plan."

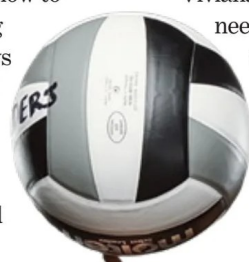
Additionally, her father, Jose Toucet, a former college basketball player in Puerto Rico, encourages Viviana every step of the way. That support has helped her be a mentor to others.

"I love getting to help the younger girls on the team," Viviana says. "I remember being unsure of myself early on in high school and just working my way up to earn a starting spot. Now, I get to help the younger girls grow. It's like a family from team retreats to little kids' camps where they ask questions about how to get better. Those are some of my favorite moments."

"Sports have taught me not to waste potential," she says. "The best advice I've ever gotten is that you're never done working, there's always something more to go after. I carry that with me every day."

As her final high school season approaches, Viviana is determined to leave a legacy of leadership and faith. She'd like to inspire the next generation the way Coach Moreman has inspired her.

"She's always known what to say," Viviana adds. "She's tough when she needs to be, she leads through Christ and she always makes time for us. She loves what she does and because of her, I found what I love, too." 



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Eric Samuels

LEGACY
RISINGUMATILLA
HIGH SCHOOL

Built by struggle, Eric Samuels returns to rebuild Umatilla High's legacy and reignite Bulldog pride.

STORY: KYLE COPPOLA
PHOTOS: NICOLE HAMEL



Eric Samuels knows what it means to fight uphill battles.

As a senior at Umatilla High School (UHS), his football team didn't win a single game. Not one.

A winless 0-10 season would crush most high school athletes' dreams — especially after winning just 10 games total from freshman to junior year. But not Eric Samuels.

He put those difficult Friday nights behind him and played four

seasons in the SEC at Vanderbilt, then professionally in the CFL with the Edmonton Eskimos, a saga that reads like a sports movie script.

Now, the UHS graduate is back where it all started only this time, he's not wearing shoulder pads. He's suited up in a whistle, a headset and a deep sense of purpose as head coach of the Bulldogs football program.

"Coming back here, it's always been a dream of mine to help build

something special where it all started for me," says Samuels.

Despite the struggles of his high school team, Samuels' talent and relentless work ethic caught the attention of Vanderbilt University.

"I wasn't prepared for the SEC level of competition when I got there," he admits. "But those challenges helped me grow."

Under Head Coach James Franklin, now at Penn State, Samuels developed

into a key contributor in the Commodore secondary. As a senior, he played in 12 games, recording 35 tackles and an interception.

Franklin's four core values—positive attitude, work ethic, willingness to sacrifice and constant competition—left a lasting impact. “I still live by those today, and I try to instill them in my players,” says Samuels.

Samuels also credits being part of the football scene since third grade and even more so, mentors like Vincent Brown, Sr., who was Wildwood Middle High head football coach in the early 2020s, for helping shape his coaching foundation. “Watching Vince and how hard he worked how much he cared, I fed off of that and still do to this very day.”

He also credits former Wildwood football Coach McKinley Rolle for continuing to help him refine his coaching skills.

“I was blessed to have coaches take me under their wing,” Samuels says.

After college, Samuels earned a shot with the CFL's Edmonton Eskimos. He played two seasons, bringing his physical style of play to the Canadian game. When his pro career ended, he returned stateside, first to Nashville, then back home to Florida in 2015.

He joined the coaching staff at Umatilla High as a defensive backs coach in 2015, working under then-head coach Steve Seward.

Three years ago, Samuels got the call that changed everything.

“Umatilla's athletic director at the time, Pat Todd, reached out and said the head job at Umatilla was available,” Samuels recalls. “It was my dream to come back to my school and get the chance to lead. I had to take it.”

Since then, he's been rebuilding brick

by brick. Under his leadership, Umatilla transitioned to the Sunshine State Athletic Association (SSAA), giving the Bulldogs a chance to build confidence, grow and compete more evenly.

“We're changing the culture, emphasizing hard work in practice, discipline and what it truly takes to win,” Samuels says. “We've had ups and downs, but the progress is there.”

Samuels is keenly aware of today's shifting high school landscape, with transfers more common than ever. But he believes his story is proof that perseverance and talent still get noticed no matter where you play.

“You don't have to be on a 10-win team to get seen. If you have the grades and the work ethic, college coaches will find you,” he says. “We only won 10 games total during my four years at Umatilla, but I still made it to the SEC and played against some of the all-time greats.”



“WE’RE CHANGING THE CULTURE, EMPHASIZING HARD WORK IN PRACTICE, DISCIPLINE AND WHAT IT TRULY TAKES TO WIN.”



Samuels is also quick to praise Umatilla's leadership, particularly Principal Brent Frazier, for balancing academics and athletics. “Our academics are second to none,” Samuels says. “We're preparing young men and women for college and life beyond football. It's the best it has ever been and continuing to improve year after year.”

Today, Samuels' mission isn't just about winning games; it's about restoring pride. The Coach says Umatilla football once held a proud place in Lake County, and he's determined to bring that spirit back.

He's living proof that hard work can lead to incredible places and now, he's laying that same foundation for his players.

“Being a Umatilla guy means everything,” Samuels says. “I want these kids to understand they can achieve greatness right here at home and they will.”





sto·ry
[staur-ee, stohr-ee]
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IN THE KITCHEN

After 10 years, Turners Kitchen + Bar continues to wow foodies with beautifully plated, crave-worthy Southern cuisine.

82m



RECIPE

Great food, served right, without compromise

Turners celebrates 10 years of refined southern flavor
and intimate dining in downtown Leesburg.

STORY: CINDY PETERSON × PHOTOS: NICOLE HAMEL





"WE FELT LIKE THIS WAS SOMETHING GOD WAS PUSHING US INTO, AND WE BOTH TRUST GOD ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT IF IT'S WHAT HE WANTS YOU TO DO, HE'S GOING TO BE FAITHFUL TO SEE IT THROUGH."

A decade ago, Jack and Allison Braton unveiled a new dining concept that became a popular destination for foodies across the state. Turners Kitchen + Bar presented – and continues to deliver – an intentional experience with a clear mission: great food, served right, without compromise.

The mission became clear to Jack as he spent his life in restaurants, perfecting every role from server, bartender and chef.

"I've been in the restaurant business my whole life, since I was 14 years old," he says. "It's all I've ever done, aside from a brief stint in real estate."

Jack's food career began at a Four Seasons hotel, where he spent nearly 14 years before moving on to other kitchens and dining rooms. That hands-on experience is woven into every detail of Turners.

The idea for the restaurant began when Jack was juggling the intense demands of restaurant work and realized it was time for a change after the birth of his youngest son.

"I knew that if we were ever gonna open our own restaurant, that was the time to do it," he says.

It was 2014, long before downtown Leesburg had the dining momentum and downtown vibe it has today.

"I thought it was kind of a ghost town at the time," he says.

But one day, while picking up his son from the Boys & Girls Club, he happened to drive past the old Levi's building. A 'for sale' sign caught his eye. One phone call led to another.

"I started working on a business plan right away," Jack says. "I knew the location didn't have a strong track record of success when it came to restaurants. I intentionally tried to make it fail on paper first — and when I couldn't, I knew it was worth the risk."

The risks, as he recalls, were real.

"We felt like this was something God was pushing us into," he says. "And we both trust God enough to know that if it's what He wants you to do, He's going to be faithful to see it through."

They opened Turners that year, with the odds against them and doubts from locals. One business owner told him that some of the other

downtown owners were worried about that location.

Jack simply told them that "If this restaurant fails, it won't be because of the location, it'll be on us."

Ten years later, Turners has proven its place — by not trying to please everyone.

A NEW CONCEPT

Turners implemented a bold seating policy from the start: small tables only. Parties of four or fewer. No exceptions.

"It wasn't an accident," Jack says. "When you're trying to accommodate a large group, it's always going to come at an expense — and it's usually at the expense of the couple celebrating their anniversary."

He explained that large parties monopolize a server's time and overwhelm the kitchen.

"The two-top's steak can end up overcooked because the kitchen is trying to execute a 16-top ticket," he says. "We didn't want to be in the position of choosing whose experience was more important."

The small-table dining experience resulted in a fair amount of pushback from diners.

“People thought we were being difficult,” he says. “But a lot of those people came back later and told us, ‘I didn’t get it at first, but now I do. The food’s always excellent. The consistency matters.’”

Turners’ model is unabologetically focused: calm, intimate dining with a strong culinary identity.

Jack and Allison realized that, “Not everybody that walks through your front door is your customer—and that’s okay.”

“It’s a concept,” Jack says. “If it doesn’t work for you, that’s fine. There’s plenty of places to go with accommodations for large groups. But if you’re looking for a thoughtful, elevated meal in a quiet space, we’re exactly what you’ve been looking for.”

THE CUISINE

The kitchen’s identity is rooted in New American cuisine with a nod to Jack’s South Carolina roots.

“It’s kind of a license to take everyday recipes and reinterpret them,” Jack says.

The influence of the Lowcountry is visible in dishes like the fried green tomato caprese, triple-butter hush

puppies and the signature sweet potato barbecue yellowfin tuna topped with fried oysters.

What elevates the menu is Turners’ relentless commitment to cooking with quality, local ingredients. Produce is sourced from places like Bountiful Farms in Groveland and microgreens come from Aquaponic Lynx. The restaurant’s chicken and eggs come from a small farm in Weirsdale, while its beef comes from the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

“Most people don’t know that the Seminoles raise over 13,000 head of cattle in the state, and the care they put into that process is incredible,” Jack says.

Seafood is also purchased locally when possible. Much of Turner’s fish comes from Stokes in Leesburg, the area’s leading exporter of fresh seafood.

That devotion to freshness means Turners has little use for a freezer. Nearly everything is made in-house, including the bacon jam, pimento cheese, green tomato marmalade, salad dressings and even the freshly ground beef.

“Great food starts with great ingredients,” Jack says. “It’s that simple. People say, ‘Your food is so good.’ I tell them, ‘It’s the ingredients. I just try not to mess them up.’”

That philosophy extends to desserts. The white chocolate bread pudding with bourbon raspberry sauce is — described by Jack as “custardy, layered and able to stand on its own like a piece of cake” — is a house favorite. Seasonal cheesecakes rotate throughout the year, especially during blueberry season when they source from Wild Goose Farms in Umatilla.

Turners serves lunch from 11am to 3pm and supper from 5 to 8pm, closing in between to reset the kitchen. Supper reservations are strongly encouraged, as they do 95 percent of their business between 5 and 7pm.

As Leesburg’s downtown grows, Jack is glad to see neighboring restaurants thrive.

“All ships rise with the tide,” he says. “Now it’s not just Turners as a destination—it’s downtown Leesburg.” 

SHRIMP + GRITS

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 c. cooked Anson Mills grits
- 8 peeled and deveined shrimp
- 1/8 c. heavy cream
- 3 tbsp pimento cheese
- 1/8 c. diced green tomatoes
- 1/8 c. diced pork belly or bacon
- 1 tbsp. bacon jam

DIRECTIONS:

Heat sauté pan or skillet over medium heat. Render raw pork belly or bacon. Add green tomato and shrimp. Cook and stir until shrimp is opaque and slightly curled. Add heavy cream and pimento cheese and stir until melted. Salt and pepper to taste. Pour over Anson Mills grits and add a dollop of bacon jam.





*“PEOPLE SAY,
‘YOUR FOOD IS
SO GOOD.’ I TELL
THEM, ‘IT’S THE
INGREDIENTS.
I JUST TRY
NOT TO MESS
THEM UP.’”*

— JACK BRATON

BREAD PUDDING

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 qt. heavy cream
- 1 c. sugar
- 1 tsp. vanilla
- 10 egg yolks
- 1 c. white chocolate chips
- 1 large loaf French bread

DIRECTIONS:

Cut French bread into 1/4 inch segments. Bring cream, sugar, vanilla to a simmer. Whisk egg yolks in a separate bowl. Using a serving ladle, temper the cream mixture into the egg yolks one scoop at a time. Overlap 1/3 of bread slices onto the bottom of a greased casserole dish. Add 1/3 custard and 1/3 white chocolate chips. Repeat 3 times total until all ingredients are used. Bake at 350 for 30 mins. Let cool before cutting and garnish.

OLD BULL COCKTAIL

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 1/2 oz. Patron
- 1 1/2 oz. grapefruit juice
- 1 1/2 oz. spicy honey simple syrup

DIRECTIONS:

Serve over ice with and garnish with a slice of habanero pepper.



**IF
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TURNERS KITCHEN + BAR

114 S. 5th Street, Leesburg

352.530.2274

www.turnerskitchen.com

Lunch: Tue.-Sat., 11am-3pm

Dinner: Tue.-Sat., 5-8pm



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→ Comment on this article or send story ideas to cindy@akersmediagroup.com.



CINDY PETERSON



REVIEW

RAW, SHUCKS!

The Troff in Eustis is a second-generation shucking success.

STORY: GINA HORAN • PHOTOS: NICOLE HAMEL

When Chet and Cindi Pando opened the Oyster Troff in Eustis back in 1998, their daughter Stephanie was just 8 years old

and could barely see over the counter. Now she not only sees over the counter, she owns the whole bar.

Renamed “The Troff,” what started as a single oyster counter in a small local restaurant has grown into one of the most legendary raw bars in Florida. With three service stations under one roof, there’s room for dozens of seats to accommodate masses of seasoned shuckers.

“Back when we opened, we moved about 250 pounds

of oysters a week,” Stephanie says. In 2014, that number hit 10,000 in a single week. Today it’s easily doubled, with millions of oysters having been plucked and shucked right in front of diners who come for the seafood and stay for the show.

Stephanie’s brother, Brian Clark, also grew up around the family business and put Eustis on the map when he won the U.S. National Oyster Shucking Championship in 2018 and went on to represent the country in Ireland. He’s world-ranked, lightning-fast and was named one of *Style*



Magazine's "40 Under 40" in 2023. He works in Tavares just down the road and provides friendly competition.

A full-time teacher by day, Stephanie trusts her husband Ryan to help run things while she's out. As GM, he does it all and particularly loves tweaking the already great recipes.

Cindi passed away earlier this year, but she lives in every corner of the restaurant. Her warmth echoes in the laughter of longtime regulars like "Three O'clock Charlie," who shows up daily to feast and chat with the crew.

Friends and colleagues remember her as a "prayer warrior" and "immovable woman of faith" who brought joy and encouragement to everyone she met.

Chet still pitches in, helping keep the family legacy going strong.

Full disclosure: I kind of begged for this assignment. The Troff has been on my radar for years, and I wasn't about to miss my shot at slurping its legendary raw treasures.

While Nicole our chief photographer was set up for photos, I eyed each mollusk like a sea otter while Ryan shucked away. They were cold and refreshing and I downed 11 in under three minutes. Of course I saved one for Nicole, who went in unsure but became a fan. I owe her another trip.

My particular jam is to bury my oyster in lemon

juice and raw horseradish to give my sinuses a wallop.

I learned that each oyster is a bit like a snowflake in that they are all different. Ryan says that each person has their own individual way to enjoy theirs.

"We have everything available for each oyster lover," Ryan says. "It really depends on who you are and how you like it." Horseradish with lemon? Hot sauce with garlic? In the end, how you dress yours is personal preference, but the quality and consistency of the oysters is very personal to the Nelsons.

"The oysters do matter," Stephanie says. "We outsource them from all over depending on the season."

After my embarrassing display, I dug into the fresh sushi-grade seared ahi and the Cajun grilled oysters, which were a cheesy, umami joy. The blackened redfish dish with potatoes was Nicole's favorite. We both loved the sweet red onion beer-battered rings.

Even though I have a hot sauce allergy, I still went for the spicy shrimp boil with corn and andouille sausage. Nicole quietly nudged the plate down-counter to prevent any self-inflicted emergency. We finished with the clam chowder, which Ryan has fine-tuned by adding fresh chunks of clam and a bit more cream to the original recipe.

Complemented by a rotation of ice-cold craft beers and a full liquor bar, The Troff has built a reputation on freshness and consistency.

The drink list includes a line-up of specialty cocktails like the Tropical Storm, Coconut Groove and Ocean Water. There are rum buckets if you're feeling beachy, and for the adventurous, the Old Smokey Flight. Of course, there are oyster shooters with vodka.

The staff is friendly and knows its stuff, especially when it comes to oysters. "With dozens of bar seats lining the space, diners get a front-row view of the action as oysters are shucked on the spot," says Laurie Larson, who has been there for three years, serving, shucking and slinging drinks.

Beyond oysters, seafood and solid service, The Troff offers a down-to-earth vibe that's equal parts laid-back and lively. Locals, snowbirds and curious first-timers all find a place at the bar. Awards line the wall and Bar Bingo takes over on Tuesdays and Thursdays, keeping the place as entertaining as it is delicious.

Yes, you'll find seafood, beer and barstools, but you'll also walk away feeling like you're part of the Troff's extended family . . . whether you slurped one oyster or 11. 🍷

A large, open oyster shell filled with a creamy, orange-colored sauce, resting on a white plate. A fresh sprig of rosemary is placed next to it. In the background, other oysters are visible.

**IF
YOU
GO**

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Their commitment to quality is evident in every bite, from hand-tossed, scratch-made dough to freshly sliced veggies and house-made sauces. Each dish is crafted with care and served with pride. Beyond their signature New York-style pizza, the menu boasts a delicious variety of Italian specialties, such as calzones, strombolis, Italian entrées, and appetizers, plus signature sandwiches, salads, wings, and desserts. A well-curated beer and wine selection complements every meal, and gluten-free options ensure there's something for everyone. Stop by for a true taste of Italy—you won't be disappointed!

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Rodello's Italian Restaurant

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Chef Amadeo Avila invites you to enjoy authentic and fresh Italian cuisine in a friendly, comfortable dining environment at Rodello's Italian Restaurant. The recipes used for his dishes are a blend of old-school traditions from Italy—the restaurant is named for a city in the old country—with new culinary inspirations that Chef Amadeo has learned during many years in the restaurant business. Flavorful, homemade Italian entrees such as Pistachio Crusted Lamb, Salmon Saltimbocca, Lobster Ravioli, Shrimp Risotto, and many others are classics and prepared with only the freshest ingredients. The lunch menu features personal pizzas, calzones, subs, and pasta. Sit in the spacious dining room or enjoy drinks or desserts like delicious gelato in the cozy lounge, which features a full bar, wine menu, and an array of specialty cocktails. Always look for new features on Chef Amadeo's menu, available on the restaurant's website, Rodellos.com.

Open Daily
11:00am - 9:00pm



Luna Azul

1341 S. 14TH ST., LEESBURG | 352.805.4174
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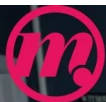
Luna Azul in Leesburg is where family, flavor and community come together. Named after the owners' daughter and rooted in tradition, this neighborhood favorite serves authentic Mexican dishes made fresh daily from scratch with no shortcuts. Signature plates like Pollo a la Crema, Aguacate Relleno and carne asada are packed with bold, satisfying flavor, while lighter options like Luna's Bowl offer variety for every appetite. The menu evolves with local tastes, but guest favorites like the Burrito Loco and handcrafted margaritas always stay. House-made desserts and kid's menu also available. Whether dining with friends, feeding the family or celebrating something special, Luna Azul brings the charm of a true hometown restaurant; warm, welcoming and full of flavor.

Mon - Thu
11:00am - 10:00pm

Fri - Sat
11:00am - 10:30pm

Sundays
11:00am - 9:00pm





BEHIND THE BAR

PEOPLE

LITTLE SHOP OF POURERS

Where tchotchkes meet tannins
—and the vibe is anything but ordinary.

STORY: GINA HORAN × PHOTO: NICOLE HAMEL

L recently popped into Hamrick Family Vineyards and Emporium in Leesburg with our managing editor Roxanne. While she ogled tea towels, tchotchkes and local art, I marveled at the magnificent collection of eclectic, eccentric imported and domestic beer available for purchase. Then I bought a Bitburger German-style N/A to consume at a later date.

As I drooled over the library of brews, the loud doorbell kept announcing the arrival of people who walked right past me into a hidden space I had yet to discover.

In the quaint little back room, proprietors Frank and Tiffany Hamrick delight guests with easy charm and just the right amount of playful gossip in a space that feels like a neighborhood secret. There are two beer taps, a well-stocked bar, barstools and tables for lounging.

“Our story started in 2012 at Maggie’s Attic in Mount Dora,” Tiffany says. “I was behind the bar and Frank just liked to drink wine.” The couple married in 2013, and Frank eventually became a winemaking oenophile.

With encouragement from friends at Dragon Flower Winery, they leased a vineyard in Howey-in-the-Hills and launched their label.

After two harvests, they shifted their focus to Leesburg. The emporium opened in August 2023, followed by the “speakeasy” in October. “We didn’t want to open a traditional bar,” Frank says. “We wanted something that felt a little unexpected.”

Both still work full-time, and with help from mom, manage to run the kind of place that feels thoughtful without being fussy. The speakeasy draws a steady mix of loyal locals and fanatical friends who support the couple in their quest to become full-fledged vintners.



The cocktail menu leans on fermentation, not distillation, which means wine-based cocktails, two craft draft beers and a wine list that reaches far beyond Florida. You can also buy those exotic beers to drink in-house.

Phase two, which will include a full production winery, is now underway. With any luck, they’ll be pouring their first batch before the year’s out and I’ll have tasted all of their 0.0% beers by summer’s end.

You can find Frank and Tiffany behind the shop Thursday-Sunday and hours vary. [@](#)



PINK 75

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 oz. wine-based gin
- 1/2 oz. raspberry simple syrup
- 1/2 oz. fresh lemon juice

DIRECTIONS:

Shake with ice and strain into a coupe glass. Top with brut rosé.

Hamrick Family Vineyards and Emporium / 118 S. 2nd St., Leesburg / 352.933.1675
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FAMILY, flavor AND A TOUCH OF MAGIC

At **Luna Azul** in Leesburg, fresh ingredients and community spirit set the table.

PAID PROMOTIONAL FEATURE



For nearly a decade, Jose Oliveros and Alexander Hernandez have shared more than a kitchen. They have created a business and a community, tied together through family, hard work and a shared vision celebrating two years as Luna Azul.

Family is part of the daily rhythm, from Jose's daughter Luna, often seen charming guests or helping behind the scenes, to the longtime staff who have been with them since day one.

The restaurant is named after Luna, but the name Luna Azul also reflects something more. In Mexican folklore, a blue moon is a rare event said to bring connection, transformation and a little bit of magic. That spirit is alive

in everything they do, from the way the team works together to the food prepared fresh each day.

"We're in the kitchen every day prepping our ingredients like guacamole and pico de gallo," Jose says. "There is only fresh food in our dishes which is very important to us."

Signature plates include Pollo a la Crema, Aguacate Relleno and Luna's Bowl, a light option with your choice of protein and a mini quesadilla on top. Fresh salmon and whole-cooked fish appear regularly, as the menu adapts to guest requests and seasonal flavors.

Of course, the beloved classics never leave. Favorites include carne asada, Tacos Luna Azul, Chimichangas and the standout Burrito Loco, which can be customized in size and ingredients for lunch or dinner. Kid's menu and house-made desserts are also available.

Everything is cooked with care by a close-knit team who can step into any role and any shift.

"In an industry with high turnover, we're proud that our staff has stayed,"

Alexander says. "We've all grown up here together."

That same care extends to the bar. The house margarita is made in barrels to meet demand, and has won "Best Beverage" four years-running at Taste of Lake. The fresh organic strawberry version is handcrafted with Patrón Silver, strawberry purée, fresh lime juice and agave nectar. The Cantorito is also popular as are the seasonal aguas frescas.

Alexander also shares weekly specials and community updates as a frequent guest on WQBQ 1410 AM and 95.1 FM.

"We're proud to be a neighborhood place and celebrate two years as Luna Azul," he says. "This community has supported us from the beginning and watched us grow, not just as a business but as a family."



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5. Learn CPR – in emergencies, immediate CPR can save lives. Consider taking a certified CPR course.

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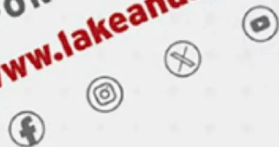
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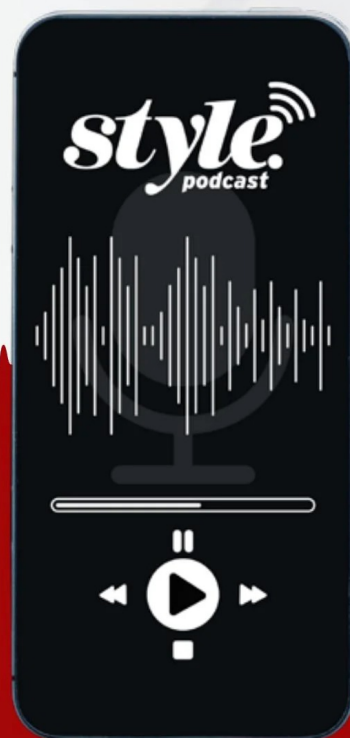
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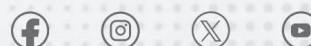
Gina Horan

Gina is a seasoned media professional who brings a wealth of experience and a dynamic perspective to The Healthy Living Podcast and the Style team. Passionate about connecting with local experts and sharing their insights, she engages Central Florida audiences with an educated and holistic approach to body, mind, spirit, and finance.



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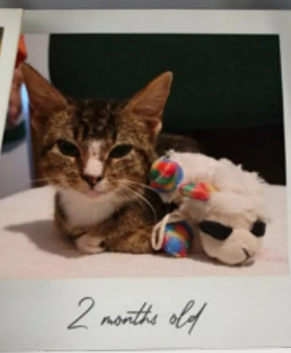
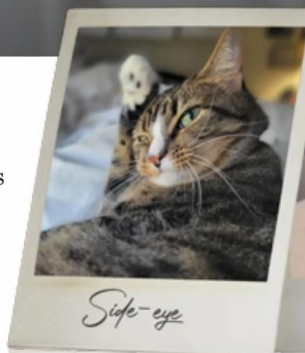


ROCKY WITH A "Y"

The Cat on the Mat

Resistance is futile when a feral kitty shows up on your doorstep.

STORY AND PHOTOS: GINA HORAN



About three years ago, I came home from a long double shift and my mom greeted me at the door with, "Don't be mad," which is usually code for me to fix something that wasn't broken.

"What did you do?"

She led me into the laundry room and produced a tiny, shivering, scratched-up feral kitten about the size of a grapefruit. "I found it on the porch with a chicken," she said. Cue the Sarah McLachlan music.

I dutifully picked it up, checked under the hood and declared it female.

"Fine," I said, and the next morning I took it to Planned Pethood Cares in Lake Panasoffkee for an exam, spay and hopeful adoption.

At reception, they asked for a name. I looked at her raccoon tail and mischievous little face.

"Rocki, with an i," I exclaimed with conviction.

In the waiting room, I got swept up in the rescue energy of other pet parents and found myself chiming in. "She showed up with a chicken," I said. "She must have been through a lot." Then I cracked a lame dad joke. "Which came first the chicken or the cat?"

After the exam, I was called in and the vet said, "She is a he." I then marched back into the lobby, held him up like Simba and declared, "It's a BOY!" which inspired raucous applause.

"Ok, you win, Rocky with a y," I told him on the way home. Cuteness as a survival strategy is very Darwinian and I'm all about it.

I never intended to invite another cat into the mix because my mom already had hers. But looking back, I realize that

while I do all the things to keep Rocky alive, he's the one who keeps me going. He brings a kind of quiet, cuddly joy that sneaks in through the cracks and stays.

Yes, he drives me nuts when he steps on my laptop during deadline, hogs my favorite pillow when there are five others available, and plots daily raids on the hamster cage. But when he's not waiting in the window, I worry. And when he greets me at the door, I melt.

As for the whereabouts of our dear mother hen, I hope she's still out there somewhere, guiding lost little kittens to their forever homes. 🐔



Hey, readers! Is there a particular subject that you would like me to write a commentary about? → Tell me, via email at gina@akersmediagroup.com.



GINA HORAN



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